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THE FOOLS' PARADE

BOOKS BY

JOHN W. VANDERCOOK

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BLACK MAJESTY

THE FOOLS' PARADE

THE FOOLS' PARADE

STORIES BY

JOHN W. VANDERCOOK

WITH DRAWINGS BY

Mahlon Blaine

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Fools' Parade
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B-E

TO

DAVID AND MINA METZGER

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THE FOOLS' PARADE

With slouch and swing around the ring
We trod the Fools' Parade.
We did not care: we knew we were
The Devil's Own Brigade:
And shaven head and feet of lead
Make a merry masquerade. . .
—The Ballad of Reading Gaol.

THE waning moon topped the jungle wall across the river, and a path of pale light lay across the black water toward us. A spotted jaguar barked somewhere far away.

LeBrun, who sat with me on the porch, rose from his chair and disappeared into the dark room behind us. He returned in a moment with a smoking lantern and hung it from a beam.

The Frenchman sat down and ran his fingers through his thin white hair.

"Habit, M'sieu." He explained. "Habit and fear. First cousins. A puddle of light like this helps to shut the night out. . . I am an old man and no longer sensitive. At night I am afraid—of all that."

He flung out his arm to include the mounting, brooding shadow of the jungle, the medley of faint sounds that came from it. "A lantern keeps those out. Memories do not crowd in so fast."

He stopped abruptly and turned his face toward me, lifted so that the rays from the lamp streamed down on it. "It is strange," he said, "how one comes to accept the world's estimate. . . How old, M'sieu, do you think I am? Past seventy?"

I shook my head—hesitantly.

His intense, sharp voice tumbled on. "Yet it would not surprise you? Of course not. Look at me. My hair is white. My skin," he held out his hand, "is like a mummy's. Every bone in my body shows! And last week, on my word, I celebrated my birthday by driving my gang of Javanese to pick the Dutchman's coffee in half the time the job was worth. That birthday was my fifty-first. This dead, dry thing I am is, by all accounts, in life's prime." My host leaned stiffly back.

"You know that I rotted six years in the prisons of Cayenne. I was a thief, so with superb logic France stole my blood, strength, health, soul, all but my precious life! To cherish that was my own fine notion." LeBrun's swift hands lashed with a gesture of incredible contempt. His tone became oily with a fierce and agonizing irony. He bowed toward me from his chair. "You see in me, my friend, the living embodiment of the most puerile fault of which life or literature is capable—anticlimax!

"In a word, M'sieu, I mean just this. I was a thief and was caught and sent to Cayenne. That

was disaster. I summoned courage to escape—four starved, half-broken men and I attempted the jungle without food, tools, maps, or means. That, M'sieu, was the happy ending! Then, I survived. I outlived my friends. . . In the great jungle I found magnificence. And I quit grandeur—for what? Jésu, for such a foolish thing. For life!"

Suddenly LeBrun was quiet and the heavy, humid equatorial dark embraced us.

I had guessed at LeBrun's history. No traveler who comes to Dutch Guiana—or Suriname, as the residents of the country call it—stays long without hearing something of the few lonely Frenchmen who live there. The stolid Dutch planters, very secretly, of course, point at them when they walk past in the hot sunshine of the streets of Paramaribo. "He escaped through the jungle, Mijnheer. Gott, it is extraordinary! Eight months to trek one hundred miles! But one must not ask questions."

To the famous penal settlements of Cayenne, adjoining Dutch Guiana, France exiles her criminals, traitors, and enemies. Sometimes a convict escapes. Rarely, very rarely, he survives. LeBrun was one who had.

The Frenchman had let his pipe go out and sat huddled in his chair, his head thrust forward as if he peered with failing eyes at some past precious thing. After his outburst his thin mouth had softened. We could hear the pale whispering of a breeze through the mango trees that formed a screen between the big house and LeBrun's whitewashed bungalow.

LeBrun's voice broke in. "M'sieu, you are no doubt curious. I think perhaps in the night like this with you, a stranger, I can meet again old friends."

He paused, cleared his throat, and began.

"My background does not matter. Middle class, a cheap cleverness, then crime, conviction, and the hulks. A swift and commonplace story. That is not my tale. I will begin on a certain afternoon, an afternoon of brutal heat in the gutters of the prison city of St. Laurent, just a hundred miles from here across the boundary river that divides French Guiana from Dutch. I was barefoot as are all the convicts of that burning town, and with bent back and eyes red from sickness grubbed at the filthy task of scavenging the streets. I was not the man I am now, M'sieu. You would not have recognized me. Now, I am successful, well fed, the contented foreman of a rich Dutchman's coffee farm. Then I was Pierre LeBrun, the thief, with no hope before me but long years of exile in the foulest prison colony in all the world. No hope—until this afternoon I speak of.

"My partner in the street cleaning, who had worked beside me for more than thirty months, was Léon Acquarone. Once he had been a clever lawyer, a graduate of the universities, and a man of power and fortune. But he was a fraud, a betrayer of trust, and at last a common barefoot convict like myself in the mud of a negro town. He spoke to me of a thing brave, brave beyond your comprehension, M'sieu. His project was escape.

"Even five years in the Cayenne prisons had not

dulled Acquarone's intellect or downed that vanity clever men have in the omnipotence of their wit. He confided in me fully. He had, he fancied, worked out every detail of the adventure he proposed. . . This was seventeen years ago, but at this moment I can see his face as he leaned toward me. Acquarone was a fraction taller than I. His skin, drawn tight by long starvation over the sharp, long frame of his nose and the bones of his cheeks, had cooked to a yellow brown. He was not pretty. But his eyes, in that world of death beyond the river, still had fire in them.

" 'You may assist me, LeBrun,' the lawyer said. Before that moment the thought of escape had not so much as touched the fringes of my mind. From then on—for a time—I was Acquarone's servant. He was my superior in class, in intellect. He had even been my better in crime. Now the fact that he had planned toward a new future showed him to be my master in point of courage, too."

LeBrun broke off suddenly and turned toward me. Again his dark, weathered face took on a look of furious irony. For a phrase or two he imitated my voice and accent.

"Escape indeed! What of it?"

He scraped his chair a little nearer mine and rested one elbow on the arm to give the gesturing of his hand full play. He shook his finger with deliberate emphasis.

"You have not been a prisoner in Cayenne, so you do not understand. Let me explain. French Guiana, just east of here, is a great district. Within its borders are many thousand square leagues of

dense, unknown jungle. There are cities, rivers, and plains of savannah grass, also there are three tiny, famous islands a little way beyond the mainland out to sea, 'Les Iles du Salut.' To translate, M'sieu, from prison parlance, the Farewell Isles: Devil's Island for the traitors, St. Joseph, and Ile Royale. Everywhere over the colony there hangs a pall of horror. The city of Cayenne, which gives its name to the whole district, and the river port of St. Laurent lie in regions which might be rich. But they have no existence except as hells where there are prisons. In my time there were nearly twenty-five thousand condemned men in Guiana, both behind bars and in perpetual exile outside the walls. Most were white Frenchmen. Some blacks and Arabs from the African colonies. Over them watched a small handful of paid officials. Yet discipline there was superb and, though many died before their time—died gratefully!—few escaped. Why? The explanation is simple. There!"

LeBrun pointed.

"The jungle, that dread, impenetrable wall. It hems the prisons round on every side. The runaway runs into that. He goes barefoot without supplies, with no knowledge of where he goes except that his course lies westward toward the Dutch settlements. Acquarone suggested that we plunge into that living darkness. Because of his intellect, the lawyer said, he would lead. He would undertake the business of meeting every situation—both in St. Laurent and later in the forest. My part was to recruit the rest of our band. Acquarone named two men who shared my cell, Abbémon, an un-

frocked priest, and a big Breton peasant named Brierre. Both were conspicuous. In spite of the long years of starvation—every Cayenne prisoner is kept mortally hungry every hour of his life, M'sieu—the priest and the peasant were strong. Fever and sun and sorrow had failed to soften the hard muscles in their arms and breasts and thighs. They were men of exceptional height, Abbémon six feet, and Brierre still taller. But alone among the strong men of the St. Laurent settlement they were not bullies. Acquarone had noted that.

"Before long I broached the project to Brierre. Brierre had once been a pauper fisherman but he had lived in St. Laurent for many years. He was a murderer sentenced to Cayenne for life. In a time of famine he had strangled his baby the day it was born. It was the eighth of his brood. He had killed his baby, he said, because he loved it and could not bear to see it live only to die because there was no food. After that it became legend in the prison that Brierre had not spoken a dozen words.

"A cell in St. Laurent is a fearful place. There were nineteen others lodged with me in a moldy box fifteen feet square with a ceiling so low the shortest of us could press his palms against it. Twelve narrow shelves of canvas supported by short wooden poles driven into the masonry were bunked in tiers of four on three walls. Some slept on these, the rest on the damp dirt floor. No covers are permitted even when a man's half-frozen with the ague of malaria. A tiny barred window gave on the night sky.

"There was rarely a moment in that close, con-

gested, stinking swelter when all of us slept. But it was vital I wait. Spies are paid with little doles of food. Men in Cayenne would sell their mothers for that.

"My time came. A cool breeze was blowing up from the sea, and all lay sprawled as silent and as awkward as dead men. I put out my hand and touched Brierre. He lay on the lowest bunk and I on the floor just under him. A fragile beam of light from the moon came through the little window and fell across his face. Brierre was a shouldering, slow, shy man. His cropped hair was so light as to be almost colorless, and his bland, quiet peasant face seemed always in a half-sleep of stolid gentleness. When I woke him he made no sound. I put my mouth near him and breathed as quickly as I could the outline of our plan; how Acquarone had made arrangements for us to be received in Suriname by friends of friends of his in France; how we were to leave St. Laurent, strike inland through the dense forest that bordered the boundary river, then cross on a raft, and work through the jungle toward safety. I told Brierre that and much more. His pale-blue eyes, strange and shadowed in the pallid, slowly moving moonbeams, watched me with a look of wonder. Almost at once I sensed that my proposal failed to rouse him. This stupid peasant, I told himself, has neither imagination nor courage. Then abruptly I asked him to go with us. I was frank. I told him why we wanted him. We should need a man who could lift and break and carry. In exchange Acquarone would finance him home—or wherever he wished to go. Fleetly, he

smiled. To my astonishment, he nodded. 'Yes, if you wish it, M'sieu,' he said.

"That was all. A man who lay near stirred and woke, and abruptly I ceased my talk. That look of marvel on Brierre's face—he was wondering at me, wondering that I, the little thief, had somehow found a lodging in my bitterness for that proud, erect thing, hope. He found me gallant, was prepared to risk his life to follow the splendid thing I so poorly symbolized.

"The next day at our work in the gutters I acquainted Acquarone with my success. Prisoners are allotted various tasks, and because the whole colony is a strong-walled jail they are seldom watched. Acquarone's thin lips drew back over his yellow teeth in a gleaming, almost joyous smile. Acquarone was a man whose passion in life was control of men. And till now through the dragging, bestial, hungry years he had been utterly shut away from the exercise of that control. Now he had again exerted influence he was stimulated as if by some strong drug. All the rest of that day, whenever the hot road was empty, he poured a babel of talk into my ears. Plans wild and sane gushed from his agile mind in a torrent; dreams of success, of quick and skillful defeat of all the terrors of the forest. Then, just at the day's end, when a negro guard with a rifle came along with his gang of laborers to take us to the prison for the night, he whispered to me I must somehow find a prisoner with money. He named Alphonse Gallay.

"I was startled and angry. Must I do everything

for this man who claimed to be the organizer? But there was no time then for further talk. We fell into that straggling, solemn line of weary men and walked through the red twilight toward the white, bare walls of St. Laurent.

II

"I knew Gallay. No one in Cayenne did not. But how I was to approach him I did not know. Gallay, M'sieu, though technically a common convict, was private secretary to the warden of St. Laurent. We knew he was of good family. We knew he had been a swindler. Then, too, we had all heard of his sonnets. He had been at St. Laurent four years then, and each night he wrote a sonnet, each night one to a separate lady. At last, when the one thousand and first sonnet was completed, he started with a sigh at the first again to write a triolet, until all the thousand and one mistresses should again be duly praised. Once I had seen him. He was tall, slender, graceful, and extraordinarily handsome. His blue eyes were shaded by long lashes, and his moist lips, even in that baking tropic sun, had never dried and become cruel like those of the rest of us. It was well known that he was permitted to have money.

"But how to reach such a man? How, in God's name, induce him to gamble his life for the risk and horror of the jungle? Why think that he would not betray us? It was the big priest Abbémon who won him for us. I did not know how for many

months. Then one night, in the depths of the forest, Gallay told me.

"We lay against each other in the half shelter of a fallen tree. By that time our coarse clothes had been torn off us by the brambles along our way. A rain came steadily down through the thick, cold darkness. Gallay's voice, as gentle, as soft, and as cultivated as if he were speaking to a lady over teacups in a salon, came to me from that nothingness of night. I remember his words now.

" 'Pierre,' he said, 'if you live you will live because of fear. When I die I shall die because I am afraid. Fear, though we will not admit it, governs all our lives. Fear brought me here. Our friend Abbémon, who snores so sweetly there at your feet, taught me what the word means, as he taught me ever since what courage is.' Gallay's voice trailed off, and I did not interrupt his silence. The rain, the lonely sound of the wind through the wet branches far above us, made sleep impossible. In a moment he went on. 'I don't think, Pierre,' he said to me, 'I've ever told you of that, my first meeting with our friend. He stopped me in a corridor at St. Laurent and spoke to me. I did not know him, but he knew my name. He lowered his voice—I think that's the only time I've heard good Bruno speak in less than a shout—and told me all in a breath that he and some others were going to escape; that he knew I had money; that I must come with him; and that it would not do, even if I gave him my precious francs, for me to remain safe behind—for I should be sure to betray him before your little band was beyond

the shadow of the wall. . . A good long breath, I grant you. I think I smiled. It was rather ridiculous to be bullied into such a thing by a barefoot giant whose name I did not even know. He stood close to me, but when I smiled he came still closer and I felt a sudden tiny pain underneath my heart. Abbémon held a knife beneath his shirt and he had pricked me with it. I understood. I said I would consider and let him know. Then he heard footsteps in the corridor and went away. I tried to forget. One morning I awoke in my cell and could not raise my head from my pallet. I found a long knife tangled in my hair, plunged deep into the boards. How it came there I did not know. Bruno had reached an arm through the bars in the darkness and pinned me like a fly. I knew his threats were honest, and knew I should like a man with such a sense of melodrama. That was all. A few days later he passed the window of the office where I sat. He was in a line of men who were being marched to the quay to unload a transport. I caught his eye and nodded, and he smiled back at me. That smile, so sudden and so charming, made me on the instant no longer dread anything, except that I might never come to know him better.' "

LeBrun stopped. A breeze from the ocean had come up the river. It brought no relief from the oppressive, breathless heat that had hung over the coast for the past fortnight but now it swung and flared the lantern so it smoked. LeBrun stood up, removed it from its hook, rattled up the chimney and blew it out.

"My foolish little protector knows its service is wasted tonight," he remarked.

He sat down again and filled his pipe. The moon-flooded darkness seemed more luminous and, curiously, far more friendly than the lantern light. In the forest behind LeBrun's house a band of howling red monkeys took up their insane, high-pitched, measured chorus. The old Frenchman listened. The faraway wailing stopped with as little warning as it had begun. In the big house behind the grove of dark mango trees the last light went out. The Dutch planter had waited for me long enough.

"It is, no doubt, bad technique to tell you how Gallay came to join us before I have introduced you properly to Abbémon. Perhaps I have saved the best to the last. Bruno, Père Bruno Abbémon before he was unfrocked, shared the same crowded cell with Brierre and myself. To approach him was easy, but I must wait once more until all the rest were sleeping. My time came. I had grown haggard, even for Cayenne, by night after night of sleeplessness. When at last all was quiet I realized painfully that Abbémon that night was lying on the favored stretcher, the hard canvas strip highest on the wall underneath the barred window. To reach his ear I must stand on tiptoe, and my shaking body must come within an inch of three other men who lay on the bunks just under his. But I was in haste. The phantom of freedom danced eternally before my eyes. I put my mouth close to Abbémon's ear and spoke his name. He turned over and stared at me through the gloom. I put

my finger to my lips and began to explain and plead. As I spoke his dark eyes stared and his heavy, red-lipped mouth relaxed in utter astonishment. Then he frightened me. Without warning he began to laugh—a great shout that must have waked the prison. He sat upright and swung his legs over so they hung from the edge of his bunk. He put his back against the mold-streaked stones of the wall and threw his great head up and laughed again. Abbémon slept naked. He made an appearance, I can assure you. I stood frozen where I was, too furious and too frightened to move. Instantly every man of the twenty in that tiny room was awake and the air was thick with questions, curses, and muttered, angry warnings. 'Shut up, you louse!' they threw at him. He pointed at me. He pointed not one finger but four, his whole left hand. It was a kingly gesture of contempt. 'It is the little one,' he said. 'He is going to leave us. Nay, he is kind enough to invite me. Do you understand, you fools? Our brave little one is going to run away!'

"For a second there was absolute silence in the cell. Then an apache on the bunk on a line with my knees laughed shortly and reached out and slapped my bottom. Several cursed Abbémon again. A few growled threats at him. And then they all resumed their sprawls and prepared to sleep again. There was silence. Do you understand, M'sieu? They had not believed him. . .

"I do not know whether shame or hatred was uppermost in my heart at that moment. The gray, amorphous figures of the sleeping men in the dark-

ness had moved, become savage and articulate, then they had grown still. No one had believed me capable of courage.

"Abbémon spoke. He did not lower his tone.

" 'Tell me more, little one,' he mocked. 'When is this adventure of yours to be? And whom else have you honored with an invitation? You are of course, very, very serious?'

"I did not answer. Then he swung his leg and kicked me gently in the chest.

" 'Confide in good Père Bruno. I am all attention.'

" 'Enough of your reeking humor, Abbémon!'

"It was a prisoner on the ground near my feet. My eyes, well accustomed now to the faint light that reflected through the window from the starlit sky outside, were on Abbémon's face when the man spoke. In a flash I understood. It was all so childish, so dangerous, and so complicated that I cannot imagine how I had the wit to guess so soon. But Abbémon had force.

"He had published it for the sake of danger and because he loved mockery. But he was with me. He kicked me again, and said, 'Speak up.' . . When I had spoken my piece he nodded, threw himself flat on his rack and turned over to sleep. The next night they put the light on us."

"The light?" I asked.

The old man nodded irritably. "Yes, yes. Abbémon's shouting brought the light. It is one of the quaint punishments in Cayenne. If there is any infraction of the prison discipline between six and six when all are locked in the cells, any noise or

fighting, then the whole roomful is punished by the light. It is a bright oil lantern which is hung from a hook in the ceiling, and it must not be extinguished. That is all, simply a lighted lantern that flares all night. But in a prison that lies in a swamp bottom in this latitude you can imagine what it means; mosquitoes, gnats, and flies come in such swarms the air is fogged with them. After every such punishment one or more always comes down with fever. The whole colony is known to its unwilling citizens, M'sieu, as the dry guillotine. It is a graphic name?

"But I must get on. We concluded our planning. In three weeks the rainy season would come to an end. Then there would be several months of fair weather ahead of us. On a certain Tuesday evening Gallay was to forge the warden's name to a special work order bearing our five numbers. This would be given to a fat French warder named Manda, and he would let us out of our respective cells and march us from the prison to the outskirts of the town. There, having been well paid, he would leave us—to return to the prison with a concocted story of a struggle and the forged pass as an additional protection to himself. He risked nothing. The prison governors do not care if they have fewer mouths to feed.

"Thanks to Abbémon, we were relieved of the nervousness of secrecy. He had made our escapade the joke of St. Laurent. With a great foolish air of clownish mystery he had told everyone. His crude joke had become perfect when he added the name of the soft aristocrat, Gallay, and the dull lifeless

fisherman, Brierre, to the list of conspirators. Outside, the business would have been born dull and have grown stupid beyond bearing. But topics of conversation are rare and nurtured preciously in the prisons of Guiana.

"The night of the escape came at last. A guard brought us our dinner. Then, when the big bowl was clean, the usual little groups were formed. Some stretched out on the canvas racks to talk. Brierre, a blond pile of a man, sat in a far corner, his head against the wall, his arms loose, and his bare feet thrust out. Abbémon laughed and made jokes and quoted Latin authors as was his habit. . . I had begun to hate Abbémon. He was not a bully, it is true. It was not that. Rather did I fancy he used his big voice and his ready laughter, his learning and his class as stupid men might use their fists. Beneath the storm of his vitality little men of lesser spirit bent and were bedraggled, as frail palm shoots are when a tornado wind laughs across the monotony of trees out there. I did not know him then for a man worn and gutted by a hounding loneliness.

"Then we heard steps in the corridor. Brierre straightened. Abbémon stopped in the midst of an oath. A warder in khaki stopped by our barred door. He fumbled with some keys and, accompanied by a breathless, frightened silence, unfolded a little paper and read our names: LeBrun, Brierre, Abbémon.

" 'The above,' he said, in a dry voice, 'have been transferred by special order to the river service. Come, you pigs.' We went out, and the door of our

cage clanged to behind us. The guard gave a curt command and we dropped into step in front of him. Acquarone and Alphonse Gallay were with him. We had not seen them in the gloom.

"Our guard conducted us to the outer gates. At his word the man in charge unlocked them and swung them wide enough for us to get through. Up the main street we marched. The negroes of the town in the crazy doorways of their shanties sat and gossiped by wavering candlelight. Pad, pad, pad went our feet on the road Acquarone and I knew so well. Then the outskirts of the settlement; silhouettes of palm tops against the moonlit sky and the harsh, faint scraping of banana leaves along the way accompanied us. The guard lighted a cigarette and shifted his heavy carbine to his left hand. Before long the mounting, opaque shadow of the jungle rose before us. The road dwindled to a weed-grown path. Abruptly the guard grounded his gun. 'Enough,' he whispered. 'Pay up, and get on with your suicide.' We stopped and Gallay brought a little roll of notes from the pocket of his shirt. He began to count out five hundred francs, the sum agreed on, but the guard reached out his hand.

" 'I'll take all that. You won't need money where you're going.'

"Abbémon cursed under his breath, and I could see Brierre's fists clench, but it was useless to protest. The moon was full—Acquarone had thought of that—and we could see one another plainly. The guard put a shining little whistle in

his mouth and smirked cruelly at us over it. Gallay gave him the money.

" 'You may be right at that,' Gallay said. 'May you spend it in some noble purpose.'

"The guard nodded, turned on his heels and started back the way we had come. We stood staring stupidly after him for a moment. . . We were free.

"Acquarone snapped his fingers. 'Come,' he whispered, 'we must get thirty miles behind us before we can afford to admire the damned scenery. I will tell you again. This path here,' he pointed to where the trail vanished under the dense shadows of the forest, 'leads due south along the river bank. It will take us, with good luck, to a deserted lumber camp twenty miles from here. Till we have passed that we are as good as in gunshot of St. Laurent. Go quietly and go fast. Brierre, drop far enough behind us so you won't be disturbed by whatever sounds we make. And listen. That pig may yet send them after us.'

"With that he plunged into the dark.

III

"Swindler, thief, fraud, blasphemer, murderer; lawyer, criminal, aristocrat, priest, and fisherman —that was the order of our fools' parade. A varied company. The God who had forgotten us must have marveled how we'd so tricked the order of our destinies as to have found one another out from all the world.

"Now and then a moonbeam through a rift in

the dark branches that met above our heads would illumine a silver puddle in our path, and one by one as each of us passed under we would take fleeting shape and then dissolve again into the velvet dark.

"Acquarone looked in those streaks of light like a lithe panther on a blood scent. I walked just behind him. His bony hands were held forward to feel out the shadows. His narrow shoulders were hunched in a little, and his back was bent. His dark eyes blazed when he turned to whisper to me. His hooked nose seemed as sharp and ravening as a vulture's.

"We kept on all night. No one spoke. Each was too lost in the maelstrom of his own hope and fear to have words for another. When the faint dawn appeared we came to the end of the path and plunged into the jungle. That instant stands clearer in my mind than almost any other." LeBrun paused.

"Have you ever faced the jungle, M'sieu? Perhaps you have seen a dog chase a bush rat, seen the rat reach the edge of a clearing and scuttle through some invisible opening into the underbrush? If so, you have seen the dog stop dead upon his haunches, bark weakly for a moment, and then walk away, tail hanging.

"Brierre and Abbémon took the lead, and Acquarone, though his eyes were angry, fell behind. On the clearing where the old lumber camp had stood we had found some plantain trees left to grow rank by those who had lived there. At Acquarone's order each tore down a monstrous

bunch to carry on with us for food. To men weakened from lives such as we were leaving behind this added burden was almost more than we could bear. Struggling on behind Brierre, catching the branches and brambles he pressed back, falling now and again into a water hole left by the rot of some great tree, I felt my load grow heavier and my legs and arms weaker with each succeeding moment. Toward noon I stumbled over a root, fell headlong, and could not get up. I had tumbled into a sort of clearing about the high, buttressed roots of a silk-cotton tree. The others welcomed my fall. Brierre flung himself on the ground. As the others came up they followed our example. Almost fainting though I was, I noticed Acquarone was last to come. He had thrown away his burden, those precious plantains. No one questioned him.

"You know how the silk-cotton tree stands, how the slender wall-like roots grow downward and outward from the trunk, forming unroofed cabinets? By accident we had discovered that first day the only shelter for man in all the forest. In the afternoon we ate our plantains. To you, or even to me now, it would seem a vile food uncooked, but to us, with the hunger of the years, it was well enough.

"All of us slept that afternoon and into the night while the sweat and silence and gloom of the jungle floor cooled with the passing of the sun into a chilling damp. I awoke toward midnight to find my body trembling with an ague of cold. My shirt, which had caught in some sharp spines, was ripped from my shoulders to the hem. My back, scratched

and goaded by a hundred briars, was so sore I groaned when my muscles moved below the skin. My feet were indescribable. We were barefoot. All were awake but no one spoke.

"From all about came the ceaseless clamor of the jungle night. Not far away we could hear the angry, curious grunting of a long-toothed boar whose nostrils had caught our strange scent. From many miles away came faintly the steady, secret dum-dum-dum-dum of a tom-tom, beaten by the slender, furious fingers of a savage witch man, remote in that equatorial land.

"Gallay was next to me. He leaned toward me and asked me who I was. I told him my name. We had never spoken before, do you realize that, M'sieu? He began to talk. Never had I heard a voice quite like his. He said, 'LeBrun, perhaps you may live, may escape from this. I wonder if you would do me a favor. Here, where is your hand?' He found it in the darkness and thrust into it a small paper package, soggy with the sweat of his body. 'I wonder if you will be kind enough to care for them for me? It doesn't matter if I die if those are preserved. I am in them. You probably can't understand such things. Yet, somehow, one does not like to end utterly, does one?' Then he turned over and slept.

"That was the beginning of my friendship with Gallay. He would never take back his poems, though I urged them on him many times. . .

"When at last that interminable night had ended, we set forth once more. Again we went in the same order. At first Acquarone, refreshed to his old in-

stincts for power, went ahead to break the path. One knife-like whip of thorns across his cheek sent him behind. Acquarone, the leader, the lawyer, the organizer, never took the lead again. In a day the jungle had recast our fates.

"That day, that night, and the next day were repetitions of the first. Then we emerged on a narrow ledge on the edge of the forest beside the silent flow of the mighty river. Beyond us lay impassable, fetid swamp. And across the river, silent and forbidding in the twilight, was the free colony of Suriname. We saw with a great lifting of the heart. . . Now our problem was to get across.

"At the point where we stood the river is fully half a mile wide. The rainy season was just over, so what was at all times a swift torrent was now a raging flood. As we watched, a great tree torn from its roots floated down the middle of the stream. A small red monkey clung to one of the branches.

"Acquarone had forgotten that at the end of the long wet season the river is most dangerous.

"We had no axes, or even knives with which to cut timbers for a raft. A periodic search had taken place a few days before and we had been stripped of the few poor tools we had collected. We knew we must use as our materials what has been used by two generations of those unhappy ones who have attempted what we were attempting.

"If ever you have passed in a boat along any of the streams of this country, M'sieu, you have seen those tall reeds that hem either side. They are as thick as a man's wrist, and very tall. They

would have to be our vessel for the perilous voyage across.

"The plantains we had brought with us were soon gone. Some cocoanuts helped out our meager fare.

"Brierre was first to remind us we had work to do. He said nothing but he threaded his way through the rank grass and the snarled weeds toward the water. In a moment we could hear him splashing, hear the rasp of his breath and the creaking of the mocca-mocca as he dragged at them. Acquarone sat up, cursed with sudden, vivid fury the stiffness and the darting pain that racked his body and then ordered us sharply to get to our tasks. For himself, he said, he would clear the ground where we had made our informal camp. We would need a decent open place where we could work conveniently upon our raft without fear of being detected by any boats that passed us in the open river. Abbémon, Gallay, and I went to join Brierre.

"He stood almost to his waist in the shallow water. That sounds like a paradox, but I am literal. The wash among the tall stems was scarcely half a yard in depth, but the bottom mud was a fluid ooze in which one must mark time to keep from sinking helplessly above one's armpits. Abbémon and I scrambled toward Brierre, but Gallay hung back. I was already to my knees in water but looked back to the rise of ground where he was hesitating. I remember how he stood there. His coarse clothes hung in rags about him and where

the skin showed through it was scratched and dirty; but his body was poised like an actor who delivers a graceful speech upon the stage. One hand was on his hip. With the other he made a graceful gesture. 'I am sorry, my friends,' he said, in that soft voice, 'but I wonder if I might be excused? I shall be far more useful if I help to clear the camping place. Since childhood I have had a terror of snakes. Besides, I am not strong. I am very sorry. Perhaps I can rid myself of so foolish a fear, but not today.' We grunted some sound of assent and Gallay, with a little, strangely gallant bow, turned away.

"It was back-breaking work. Though the mud was soft, the roots clung like a curse of God. It took the combined strength of Abbémon and myself to wrench each one free. Brierre worked in silence and alone. Abbémon sang loud unfamiliar songs he told me were Latin hymns.

"I have said Abbémon was a priest. Did I tell you how he came to Cayenne? He had been curé of a wealthy little parish on the outskirts of Toulouse. His duties and his vows could never have weighed heavily on him. He came to Cayenne because he had melted up and sold a golden chalice from his church. It seems he needed funds to defray the costs of the many charming ladies he entertained at night in his chapel. The ecclesiastical authorities, after they had unfrocked him, were so infuriated they gave him over to the police. He came to Guiana in the hulks like a common felon. It never occurred to him he had committed a shameful crime. A thousand times he bellowed curses

at the stupidity that had made him so careless as to be caught and called down double damnation on the family which had urged him into a profession for which he had so lusty a dislike. . .

"By dusk we had piled a fair-sized hillock of reeds in the clearing Gallay and Acquarone had formed. That night, though they were wet from the river and slimy from the bottom mud, they made a pleasant couch. We lay in a dead tangle like dummies flung from a housetop and slept the dreamless sleep of weary men. The following days were repetitions of the first. Now our pile of stalks had grown so great we were ready to set about weaving our raft.

"We began. It had been a time of strenuous work and little food. But we had caught with our hands some oily river fish among the reeds and eaten them raw. Our enthusiasm was unabated. We were happy. For the first time in many years we were working toward a purpose, and that purpose was the fulfillment of our impassioned dream of freedom. We were toiling toward a resurrection of body and soul twice as glamorous and thrice as real as any the pale priests offer. This was our purgatory. We scaled its agonies with relish. The laughter and the talk and the exciting discoveries we began to make in friendship—a kingdom from which we had been exiled all our lives—turned the adventure into a queer junket, not at all a grinding tragedy. In a true sense, it was the culmination of our fretted, useless lives. We had found courage and felt the lifting of the soul and the sense of

strength and joy that comes with its discovery. And we had found one another. We might learn to hate. But we were comrades and allies.

"Weaving the raft proved more arduous than we had anticipated. The stalks of reed were tough and springy. Our plan was to pile a series of diagonally woven mats one upon the other until the thing would be thick and heavy enough to support us. But the vines we used as rope broke continually, and the wet stalks when dry would twist into impossible shapes.

"However, we finished at last. It was a crazy, shapeless, savage seeming thing. And we, too, with our torn canvas clothes all befouled and bloodied, our hands ragged, and with two weeks' beard on our gaunt cheeks, were like weird ghosts from some deep pit of foulness. It seemed a lifetime had passed, and still our necks were in the shadow of the weighted knife and our torn shirts not yet beyond the fingers of the law.

"It took our combined strength to carry our handiwork to the water's edge. There, in the torrid yellow noon of a blazing day, we saw it float triumphantly upon the bosom of the river. Acquarone was the first to climb on board. With a sinking of the heart we saw that even his slight weight lowered the raft ominously. Then I got on, next Abbémon, Brierre, and last of all, Alphonse Gallay.

"M'sieu, have you ever felt your heart break within your breast? When we were all on the raft it had sunk below the surface. We lay with our bodies tangled together and our heads strained up

and back. The river lapped our lips. It seemed we had failed.

"It was Gallay who renewed our spirits. He showed us what we had not realized—that though our weight had thrust the raft down it still did not rest on the bottom—that as we urged it into deeper water it seemed to sink no farther. He suggested we go ahead, said that as for himself he minded a slight wetting not at all.

"The suggestion was welcome. We were men who too many times had known the hurt of hope that dies. We waited for nothing. We had nothing to take with us, nothing to leave behind.

"Brierre and Abbémon got long curved scoops of fibrous bark torn from the base of a palm trunk. Together, working their rude paddles with one hand while clinging with the other to the sinking raft, they forced us out toward the middle of the river. Then the current took us, whirled us round a dozen times and sent us hurtling down the stream.

"I have often thought how we must have looked to the red eyes of a black vulture that sighted us that day and followed us in the air. Just our heads and sometimes our shoulders came above the water. Now and again the working elbows of Brierre and Abbémon would splash the surface. Each whirlpool sent us deep down to come up again spluttering, half drowning, calling aloud with fear and the pain of water in our lungs. Our hair was long and tangled. Water flattened it across our brows so we looked like molded rats. Our eyes were

bloodshot, our cheeks sunken, and our loose mouths whimpering. The carrion must have wondered how dead men could be so noisy. It did not leave us all the long relentless day."

LeBrun halted abruptly and as abruptly went on, but with a cold precision in his tone. "M'sieu, I have not perhaps told you a pretty tale thus far. What I must tell you now no words of mine can make clear. The current of the Marowyne River, as you know if you have seen it in time of flood, moves like a twisting arrow down the very center of the stream. It seems to take new sustenance at every yard from the half-peace of the waters that lie along the banks. All our struggles, all of the heroic efforts of Abbémon and Brierre were powerless to divert us toward the opposite bank. We were carried downstream—swift as a waterfall. Every moment brought us nearer to the crowded reaches of the lower river—and recapture. Never did we make an inch of headway toward the Dutch side.

"Bear in mind, my friend, all we had gone through. A little before sunset, after full five hours of that awful journey we could see the white walls of the prison we had left. We had been swept back to its very doors. We could see the boats along the quay. We imagined that each that moved was coming out to fetch us. Then a twisting eddy of the current sent us toward the Suriname side. We kicked and beat the water with our hands. And in the foul mud of a swamp on the left, the Suriname bank—the precious side of safety, we came at last to land. . . I can tell you this, M'sieu, yet no gift of words is given me to describe the emotions

of that day. Finally we struggled to shelter among the reeds and the sleep of exhaustion claimed us."

IV

The tide of the river was running in. It filled LeBrun's pause with a sound like faint laughter. Occasionally a fish leaped in midstream, but its splash merged quickly into the vibrant monotony of the night noises.

The old man, now half invisible in the shadow of the porch roof, was leaning forward, his frail fingers snarled tight in his thin white hair. He had stopped without warning. He began just as suddenly, jerking his head up to stare out into the shadows.

"Fate was not done with us yet, it seemed. Our crazy raft came to land on the side that was safe from the prison. They might even see us now, but we were free. Our journey was beginning.

"All that night and next day we lay asleep like dead men hidden in the sharp grasses of the marsh. We were urged again to movement by the unremitting pangs of hunger. The little red crabs that climbed in and out of the holes in the soft ooze of the riverbank became our food. Each of us selected an area, crouched, slowly sinking into the mud, until the crabs had forgotten their alarm and came creeping forth. Then we would pounce, catch them, and break the shells. The tiny morsel of meat was oily and bitter. It took us all day long to get sufficient to appease our hunger.

"We knew well enough that we must not linger

on the way no matter how tired we were. In the jungle the struggle for existence is too hard, the odds too overwhelming for one to survive there long. . . We were on the left bank of the Marowyne River. From that point to the first inhabited Dutch settlements on the Cottica River was a distance which well-fed men on a known trail could walk in thirty hours. We knew that. But we also knew that there was no trail, that the way led through a great uninhabited district of swamp and jungle that at this season of the year stood breast high in places in black, stagnant rain-water. We should have to cut inland to higher ground and run the deadly risk of losing our sense of direction. The point where we had beached was in the middle of an endless tangle of mangroves.

"You have seen the mangrove, M'sieu. They border the sea-front and hem in the marshes everywhere. Their twisting stalks sometimes stand ten feet or more above high water, and the roots squirm out and down to foothold in the bottom mud. This mud is so porous it is like a quicksand. It is almost impossible to cut mangroves with an axe. They bend and lash like angry snakes. We, with only our bare hands, had to go through it though. We were surrounded.

"Have you ever dreamed a nightmare, my friend, in which you have found yourself at the bottom of some dank well? Have you tried with bleeding fingers to seize upon something by which you could lift yourself out and away from terror—and felt nothing but the slime of cold, straight walls? Then perhaps you will understand. There was nothing

for it but to wade blindly among the roots, find fingerhold and, like monkeys, draw ourselves up. Grueling work. The blazing sun combined with the moist air to sweat us like steam. The roots were slippery. When we had reached the upper level where the main stalks grow, a full eight feet above the ground, we worked our way forward by stepping carefully from root to root. Time and again we missed our grips and slithered down into the greasy mud.

"That night, with our arms caught around the stalks, we rested sleeplessly till dawn. Then the nightmare began again.

"An experience like that is a test of character. Abbémon and Brierre, who kept ahead, clung like master apes to stretch out helping hands a thousand times to the rest of us. Even Gallay aided where he could. I remember the lawyer Acquarone as always reaching forward for help, never back to those behind. In the prison I had admired him for his energy of mind. The forest showed a different man. Because he recognized he now could never go ahead, could never issue a command which we should heed, his face grew sullen, and cruel anger mingled with the fear that had come to dwell forever in his eyes. All his life Acquarone had been accustomed to being served by others. Now he must help himself or die. He resented the weakness that made him stretch out his hands for aid, hated us when we gave it him. . .

"That night we built a sort of camp on a strip of dry ground. We were approaching higher land. But we got little sleep. Convicts from St. Laurent

might fancy they were used to mosquitoes. We knew nothing! Here in the silent swamp they were so thick they—I speak literally, M'sieu!—darkened the air so the very moon was hidden. We by now were all but naked and without protection. We took turn about. While one slept, another stood above him and swirled a broom of grass about himself and the man on the ground. It helped a little. We drew lots. My turn to sleep came last thing at night.

"When I awoke Gallay stood above me. He was reeling with exhaustion, and his fair blue eyes were red with want of sleep; yet his arms moved slowly, and the grasses flayed like whips of twisting smoke about himself and me. Beyond him, massive and still against the sun, I saw the big priest Abbémon like a sturdy, ancient tree whose limbs sway in the breeze.

"I got up and kicked Acquarone and Brierre awake. I took with a tenderness new to me the grasses from the stiffened fingers of Gallay and bade him lie down and rest awhile. We crouched there in the clearing of the marsh as the mists floated up into the reaching fingers of the sun and held a council.

"We knew the Dutch settlements were to the west and north of where we were. Our only guide was the knowledge the sun rose in the east and set in the west. We could not go on through the bottom lands. We should have to get to the forest itself, although it stood out of our direct path. We could see it, not very far away, upon a rise: green, primeval, still. We must get to it.

"I say, M'sieu," LeBrun spoke with a queer, deliberate exactitude, "that we could see the forest. It could not have been more than two miles away. On the evening of the fourth day we reached it. We had to find food—crabs, molluscs, roots, even leaves, all eaten raw. Then, too, we were broken, withered with a mortal weariness, and we had to rest. The swamp itself set up a barrier which no men could pass but those who had learned that death is an elusive thing.

"You have seen swamps in this country. I do not mean mangrove swamps. It was not wet enough where we now were for them. They have a quiet and easy look. The clumps of sword grass stand close together across a level plain. The sharp pale grass sways gently in the wind. Set foot on such a plain and you find it is a devil's trap. The grass clumps seem firm. One might fancy he could walk from one to other as he crossed streams in childhood over smooth stones. But try that. For a second your foothold seems firm, then like a live thing, it trips you and throws you into the black mud at one side. That mud is like nothing else in the world.

"Do you know the clinging, frightening feel that tingles up your nerves when you thrust your bare arm into a sack of grain? The swamp mud is like that, but the difference is that when you draw your hand from the grain it comes away. When you try to haul your feet from the marsh mud it clings the tighter and draws you down. . . Today, with stout boots and a stick I would not attempt it. Then, barefoot, we flung ourselves upon it and

grappled with it in our nakedness. We moved forward just a little each day.

"It was a wordless time. We did not speak. We felt we were men set against an enemy who would surely conquer if we wasted precious breath in talk."

LeBrun turned toward me. "That is why I lighted a lantern tonight, M'sieu. There in the marsh, there came to me the sense that all nature down here—and I suppose it is so around all the vast hot belly of the world—is a thing that lives, that seeks sly means to destroy all men who trespass upon its silence and its ancient power. Nothing will rid me of that state of mind. For nearly eight months in every instant of every hour of every day I saw with my hurting eyes, sensed with my mind, that enmity. It is a thing—a thing that never forgets. . . The jungle may seem a place of magnificent life. But I tell you it is not. It is death itself. Why do those trees out there reach thrice the height and girth of trees in France? It is because they kill and keep on killing.

"I have seen, beyond there in the forest, a monster shaft of wood a hundred horses could not budge. But a tender little vine had grown about it, spread from its topmost branches across the high ceiling of the jungle, and torn that tree like a weed from its roots and set it gently swaying far above the ground.

"On our bellies we came across the swamp, clutching with our hands, thrusting with our legs like wounded frogs. We were slimed and caked with mud. But we got through. At last we stood at

the high closed doorway of the jungle. For good or ill we now must venture in.

V

"In the bush we discovered a new difficulty. We could rarely see the sun. In a trackless wilderness where one may never go more than two paces in a straight line, keeping one's direction is hard. When trees and vines grow so dense that one cannot discern so much as the region of the dawn it becomes an impossibility. It is like standing in a quiet mysterious cave within the womb of the world, gazing vainly up for a hint of sky to show that men still live. The jungle is a shut crypt that will surrender nothing.

"We were lost. God knows why we did not starve. Food became a passion, a dominating, dreadful desire. We ate leaves and roots like hogs. Our stomachs grew swollen with the stuff we gorged and still we were hungry. Bulk but no nourishment, you see.

"Each night we tried to find a mora or silk-cotton tree between whose buttressed roots we could find shelter. The brambles are not so thick between the buttresses. It was shelter of a sort, if not security. In the day the jungle is empty but with the dark all the beasts and snakes, all voices and dangers, come to fullest life.

"Once Gallay, who dreaded the dark like a child, put out his hand in his sleep and touched the smooth muscles of a snake. When it had gone

he huddled in a knot till dawn crying with fear. After that Abbémon always slept beside him.

"The priest and Brierre did not know, I think, what fear of this kind was. Abbémon told me that sometimes Gallay would put his hand into his and so sleep.

"Those two became fast friends. During pauses in the day they would whisper to each other. Gallay read his sonnets to the priest. He took them from me for the time and then returned them again. Abbémon would praise the verses and they would go on to talk of other, endless things I could not understand. More and more Gallay learned to live within his mind. His body, never very strong, had become like a pale, gaunt skeleton. As he walked he seemed almost to float, as they say ghosts do. But always his red lips were moist and his blue eyes smiled. Now his yellow beard had grown quite long. His curling hair fell down behind his head like a waterfall of sunlight. It gave him with each succeeding day more and more the look of some pale, outcast Christ come for a little while to learn the sufferings of men.

"Abbémon had grown thinner, but the muscles beneath the loosening skin of his bare arms and shaggy chest were still like cables of quick steel. His narrow lips had grown kinder, and his hands learned a new gentleness. A hundred times I caught him giving Gallay some morsel of food, perhaps a warm rat or a fish he had caught. He always said he had been fortunate and found enough for two —and always I knew he lied.

"Brierre had forgotten something of his silence

but his strength and great serenity stayed on. It was he who gave to each his share in a common task, who went ahead to break the way.

"Our chief dependence for food became the little cavies. You have seen them, no doubt? They are pretty little ratlike things with brown eyes and fat, awkward, hairy bodies. And they are as smart as the devil. We would have to lie on the ground by their holes sometimes for hours on end before they would come out and we could seize them. . .

"We were men who had known the fair things of life, warmth, softness, sometimes beauty. But all that was before we came in the convict hulks to the prisons of Cayenne. Now to all of us the warm blood of a rat on our lips was a caress. Nor did we yet feel an instant of regret. We had come to a hell, but it was better than the cells of St. Laurent, and we were together. We were explorers, exploring new recesses of our souls.

"Once Brierre came upon a snake. He was in the lead. He thrust aside a branch and tripped forward over a vine that caught his foot. He saw too late to save himself. His arms, head and shoulders pitched straight within a loop made by a boa constrictor that hung festooned from the branch of a tree. It was, I think, asleep, but to this rude awakening it responded to the instinct of its kind. Like a pile of rope the dark coils fell around Brierre's struggling body. For a fraction of a second he threshed stumblingly about, then became master of himself. The constrictor was already once about his waist, its flat head hovered angrily before his face. Brierre's breath came like the sound of a

"He had killed a great constrictor," he said, "with his naked hands."

band-saw striking wood. But his hands were free and he seized the thing about its neck and clung there.

"Abbémon and I leaped forward. The priest tore at the tightening folds while I struggled with its thrashing tail. Still Brierre's fingers pressed into its throat. For a full four minutes we struggled soundlessly there in the pale green twilight of the jungle floor. Then the powerful coils relaxed, slipped down to the ground and Brierre stepped free. But he did not let go. In spite of my own stress I can remember how the veins and bones, blue and white and hard, stood out along the big man's hands.

"I found a rock and in a moment it was dead.

"That night, for the first time since I had known him, Brierre talked and laughed. He made us feel the muscles of his arms. He had killed a great constrictor, he said, with his naked hands. He forgot the parts Abbémon and I had played. He had found pride—pride in the hands that strangled his baby because he loved it, the hands that helped the poet Gallay, who was weak, through the tangle of the mangrove swamp."

VI

The old man methodically filled and lighted his pipe. He did not look toward me, seemed to have forgotten my existence, to have forgotten everything, the little whitewashed bungalow, the screen of mango trees, the big house asleep in the darkness. It was evident he told his tale not for me, but

as a certain precious ritual of memory. Earlier in the evening a quality of fierceness, of bitter anger, had pervaded his voice and mood, colored every topic we had touched upon. Now there was no trace of fury in his tone.

"The forests of Suriname," he continued at last, "are broken here and there by open stretches called savannahs. They are curious. You may work for days through thick, rank jungle and then without warning stumble out upon dry, sandy desert. In the forest the earth is black. In the savannahs, with no apparent transition, it is white, dry, crystalline, and incapable of supporting any growth less hardy than sparse grass, stunted bushes, with here and there in rain-water bottoms a few moriche palms. In the jungle it is hot enough, God knows. But on those desert plains where there is nothing between your bare head and the vicious glare of the tropical sun, the body of even the hardiest droops with fatigue within an hour, and the brain seems to teeter on the verge of madness from the white cruelty of light the sands send up into your eyes. Upon these savannahs the Carib Indians live.

"Only three times did we come upon their villages. And three times they saw us from afar, recognized us for what we were, savage escaped convicts from Cayenne, and fled. They could see us from a great distance across the plain, and they are a shy and fearful people. By the time we had blundered to the grass huts of their town they had taken refuge in the bush. What was worse, they had taken all their possessions with them. I mean that exactly. It is a way they have. The huts stood

about an empty clearing. Within them the fresh coals of little fires showed they had been lately tenanted, but the most furious and heart-sinking search failed to reveal so much as a sour discarded lump of cassava bread or a knife or tool or garment of any kind. At last, our eyes wet with the bitterness of disappointment, we would go away and resume our never-ending journey. Three times this happened."

LeBrun abruptly stopped again. "You must forgive me, M'sieu, if I neglect the device of exact chronology. Those eight months in the forest stay in my mind like a well-remembered dream. I could relive for you each moment of each day of all that time, but then my tale would have the unreality of a dream. You know how it is when one ventures far abroad in sleep? Time seems to cease to be, yet when you awake you know you have slept but a little while. My memory is like that. Twenty lifetimes passed, but now I know it was only a little while, a dream of death between quiet days of life on either side. It will be best, I think, if I only tell of special times and fates and things that came to us.

"Where we were now the Indians had roamed for food for generations, and the few wild creatures left had learned uncanny wiliness. Even at night the forest was almost quiet except for the eternal shrilling of the insects, and sometimes far away the hoarse bark of a jaguar. The problem of food became, if possible, increasingly difficult. It was Abbémon who proved the most skillful hunter. He could lie still longer, snatch more quickly than

the rest. Thank God, he was sometimes generous. Armadillos and the ground rats were our most frequent diet.

"A change had come over us. By this time nearly four months had passed—four months, and the first Dutch towns were only thirty hours of walking from the mangrove swamp where we had beached! Strangely, we had lost the sense of haste. All but Acquarone.

"The rest of us had come unconsciously half to accept the jungle. We never talked any more of what we would do when we reached civilization. That hope was receding every day, and the agony of its fading was too deep to find more than increased pain in words. We were men doomed, we felt. But there was no use whining. Meanwhile there was the quest for food, talk, the long dreadful nights, no longer terrible because we lay together, and freedom. We had quit Cayenne and we still lived. We had had courage to escape, courage enough to carry us thus far. . . . All but the lawyer Acquarone.

"Little by little he began to slip away from us. Now we knew him for a coward, a man ridden by a silly vanity that tied his hands and strained his lips. He was clever, a schemer. But the jungle wanted neither cleverness nor schemes, only strength, patience, and no whimpering. But he would not give up. He still tried to play the lawyer and the fraud. Rather than hunt for himself, he would offer to buy what we had found, buy with promises payable in Paris. He would not admit he was ridiculous. Once or twice he dared

to steal food from us. If I read his mind right, he had somehow the thought that we, the men he'd led, owed him, the leader. He never dared voice the thought, if he had it, it is true. We spoke to him seldom. We despised him. He slept a little apart from us, walked behind after the path was broken.

"But once he made a dangerous mistake. On the few occasions he had snatched food from me and from Brierre we had been too weary, too contemptuous to touch him, content that he cringed and avoided us for a little while afterwards. Then one afternoon when big Abbémon had just caught a water rat by the bank of a stream, Acquarone, brave with hunger, snatched it and ran away.

"Abbémon was up and after him in a single bound. The rest of us lay partly concealed in the weeds, waiting too for rats, and we saw the priest seize the lawyer by the throat, drag him back to the brook, and with no more effort than a giant shows when he swings an empty sack, drop to his knees, fling the screaming lawyer in and hold him under. The dark water in the shallows was lashed to a white froth. Abbémon, his long black hair falling forward over his eyes, lay flat on the brink, his knotted hairy right arm thrust straight down, the hand still around the throat of the drowning man. Gallay, Brierre, and I were on the opposite side. We rose to our feet and watched. We said nothing, scarcely felt. Gallay trembled and covered his eyes with his white, long-fingered hands. One great bubble broke the surface. Down there in the dark water the little clever fraud was dying.

"Abbémon laughed. I have said he was loud. His sudden full voice was startling, terrible in its humorlessness. He got to his feet, but did not let go Acquarone's throat. He was still struggling, but more feebly when Abbémon dragged him up the bank and flung him into the long grass. We caught our breath. Somehow this was a more terrible gesture of contempt.

"Abbémon turned on his heel and walked away. He did not once look back to where the lawyer lay panting and coughing from the water in his lungs. One by one the rest of us crossed the creek and followed the priest, our eyes avoiding Acquarone. He rejoined us at the camping place at twilight. We did not speak to him nor he to us. But I have never seen a man whose face was so seamed and lined with fear and fury mingled. His shifty eyes glanced constantly upon our faces. He had found room among his crowded fears for a new and overmastering fear.

"Cowardice, M'sieu, is a most extraordinary thing. It will sometimes lead men to venture more bravely, more madly than all the hopes of pretty ribbons that adorn the coats of Maréchals of France. . .

"The next morning when we crawled from our separate cabinets between the mora roots we found Acquarone had gone. During the night he had made up his mind. We could see from the bent-back twigs of the broken path by which we had reached the tree that he had gone back the way we had come. We never saw him again.

"Abbémon shrugged his shoulders, Gallay shook

his head, I spat upon the ground. Evidently his intention was to retrace our path until he had come to Cayenne. It was a magnificent hope, the magnificent hope of a coward who turns his back to the guns of the enemy to flee to court-martial behind the lines. I have never known what happened to him. He never reached Cayenne. Perhaps a snake or a jaguar dined. Or he may have reached the marshes and the mangroves and there lies deep down in a wet, black grave of mud. . . But my friend, is it not much in this life of ours once at least to achieve grandeur? A gesture? What matters more? I never have and I have envied Acquarone!

VII

"It is like the rhyme of the blackbirds. 'Now we were four.'

"We had no notion where we were. We still directed our course as best we could toward the west, bearing a little north. But for all we knew, we might be far inland, might have already passed *behind* the settlements. Do you understand? You know that along the Guiana coast only the region nearest the sea is inhabited. We realized a terrible possibility. If it was true that our wanderings had taken us too far inland, it was entirely possible that we might go on for years, always toward the west, always through impenetrable jungles and swamps —a perpetual great wilderness—and never, till we reached the Pacific two thousand miles away, come upon a living mortal soul!

"We had crossed several rivers, but none large enough to make us think we were upon one of the main water highways at the mouths of which there are cities. Our hope that we would come out alive became—what shall I say?—academic. Yet we were not miserable. We were congenial. The talk of Gallay and Abbémon opened new worlds and new philosophies to me. I listened to them now, stored away dreams and words which have companioned me ever since. . . Those two had become such friends as one may rarely see. The priest did not shout any more, did not bully. He had found—for the first time in his life—a use for strength, and it gave him peace. He watched over that pale boy like a mother over a firstborn child.

"Brierre still talked of his hands and the snake he had killed with them. He still walked ahead and broke the fiercest resistance of the undergrowth. Though privation had greatly diminished his strength he would not admit it. Often his eyes would start out and his face grow scarlet with the effort of strains he was no longer capable of bearing. Nothing we could say made him cease. He scorned our pleading and showed us his hands.

"The rainy season had begun. No day passed without a thunderous downpour from which the forest offered no possible shelter. Besides discomfort—and we were connoisseurs of discomfort—it brought a new danger. The tigers, as the spotted jaguars are called down here, had grown incautious. In the time of long rains the hares and ground-hogs hide deep in their burrows most of the twenty-four hours, coming out only for an hour

or two at dusk to nibble the wet-softened roots, so the carnivora have a hard time of it. Until now our man-scent had warned the jaguars off. Now the contrary was true. Hunger makes a hero even of a Guiana tiger, especially in virgin districts where they have had no experience of men. Often we heard two or three in the low branches near to where we lay, barking with curiosity and anger. Several times they were so near we stayed awake till dawn and shouted to frighten them away.

"We crouched back to back, shivering in the rain, and sent out our cries. One would have thought us four ghouls of the jungle clustered on the grave of a god we had slain. The last vestiges of our canvas clothes had long since been torn away. The incessant rain matted our long hair and beards till they dripped and glistened like dank seaweed on a black rock shore. Our cheeks were hollow, and the vines and leaves we tied about us for protection gave us more than ever the look of forest demons. Two succeeding nights we sat and shouted hoarse curses between coughs the rains had racked our throats with. As we grew agonized with want of sleep we grew angry with the ferocity of impotence. The third night the tigers still crackled the branches and howled in the dark but we could no longer postpone our need for sleep. The rain came down like water gushing through a monstrous sieve but we huddled there and snored.

"I awoke long after midnight to find the rain had stopped and a moon was out. By its light I saw what had roused me. Brierre, who slept beside me, had risen and stood bathed in a patch of

moonlight with his back toward me. I opened my mouth to ask him what the devil he was about; then I saw and the words choked in my throat. On a low branch not ten feet away crouched a golden, spotted jaguar, its eyes gleaming with an inward fire. Brierre was facing it, a stick in his hand. He was quite still and he looked at the tiger. Both were poised. I roused the others with a jab of my elbow.

"We did not know what to do. For what must have been two long minutes we crouched upon the ground and stared with eyes of terror. Brierre stood still, and the tiger crouched. No one of us uttered a sound. Then Brierre took one step forward and raised the mighty arm that held the stick. It was the signal. Like a bolt of yellow thunder the beast sprang through the moonlight. With a cry we three upon the ground leaped up. Brierre struck down with the stick. With a groan we heard it snap rottenly and scatter on the ground. It had stopped the creature's leap but it came again in a flash of snarling fury. Brierre met it with his hands, the hands that had killed the snake. Together they rolled on the ground.

"It seemed like an age. But it must have been soon that we saw the writhing, bloody body of Brierre begin slowly to grow still. His hands relaxed their grip. The tiger with a snarl buried its teeth in the man's throat and at last, and not till now, did we three dazed fools come to our senses. We sprang forward with a shout of fury. The beast started, and its heavy head turned toward us. We could see dark slobber dripping from its mouth.

Then, with a crash of snapping twigs, it bounded into the darkness and was gone.

"There was nothing to do. For the hours that intervened till dawn we sat like dogs upon our haunches there in the clearing beside the body of our friend. And in the morning when we had dug with sore fingers a hole in the black wet ground to receive him we took him and tenderly laid him in and upon our knees shoved back with trembling hands the earth to cover him. The tiger's victory had been complete. It had scratched and torn Brierre until we could not have recognized him—but for one thing. Above his wounded chest we crossed his hands. They were white and clean and strong and the bones shone through. They were still clenched, held in death as he had shaped them when he strangled the great snake and, so late, discovered pride.

VIII

"Now we were three.

"Weeks passed and a change, a change difficult to describe, came into the mood of our life. When we had fought for place upon the sinking raft, when we had struggled through the mangroves, each had thought only of himself. We had shared common tasks, yes, but with no thought of comradeship. Now Abbémon would find food while Gallay and I rested. Or I would stay on guard all night while those two slept. It became a habit for each of us to work only for the other two, to trust to them to care for him.

"Sometimes we came upon a tree that could be climbed. This became my duty. I would scramble like a monkey up through the vines and branches till my friends below were lost to sight. At last, if I was lucky, I would reach a topmost limb from which I could look out across the great high level of the jungle roof. It was another world up there, an endless, soaring meadow of soft green. Here and there a taller tree would break the expanse, or a shadowy line would indicate where a river lay. But that was all. No clearings, no smoke of friendly fires, no blessed glimpse of the sea. At least I was able to report that it was plain we had come too far inland and would have to direct our course more to the north again.

"Eventually we found a narrow creek and followed it. We knew a little of the configuration of the Guiana district, knew that the country rises slowly from the level coastal plain into great mountains several hundred miles inland; so it was evident the stream must somewhere flow to the sea, or to a river that led to the sea.

"The going was the easiest we had yet experienced. The creek was in many places so shallow that we walked down the middle of it.

"Occasionally crocodiles sunning themselves on flats of odorous mud would scurry away as we splashed into sight. Perhaps we had followed that backwater for a week, or maybe two. I cannot recollect exactly. It cannot matter. Then the God who had watched over us so close"—once more LeBrun's agile hands cut the shadows with that

gesture of furious irony—"played one last dirty trick.

"We came to a wide, deep pool around which we were forced to make our way through the coarse weeds and bushes on the bank. The ground was treacherous and sloped sharply down to the water. We were ahead a little when we heard Gallay slip. With a graceless contortion he fell into the pool. I remember he laughed at his own discomfiture as he fell. But the laugh froze to a scream. We turned to see that Gallay was caught round the middle by the coil of a huge snake. We knew what it was, an anaconda, the most monstrous reptile in the world. This one was five times as long as a man is tall. It had been lying half in the water, half in the long grass and Gallay's stumble had startled it, no doubt. It had responded by throwing a quick loop around his body.

"Thank God we did not hesitate. Once before our stupid indecision had cost Brierre his life. Abbémon and I were down on our bellies in the mud at once struggling with that snake. We hauled at its slippery muscles like sailors pull at rope. We kicked and wrenched and as it moved were now in the water, now in the mud; we shouted and cursed like drunken drill sergeants. And we won.

"To judge by great bulges in its body, it had dined recently and well, no doubt wanted nothing more than to be left in peace to sleep. With a mighty twisting lunge it was gone to the dark depths of the pool, and Gallay, still screaming, was safe in our arms.

"But he would not be comforted. We could not

tell him he was safe. He fought us like a frightened animal. We carried him to the shelter of a great tree not far away and all night we clung to him and kept up an incessant murmur of helpless reassurances that he was with us, his friends who loved him. Toward morning he grew quieter from sheer exhaustion and at last fell into a troubled sleep.

"Fearful lest the delirium should come back if when he awoke he found himself so close to the place of the encounter we carried him through the forest all that afternoon until we found a quiet clearing remote from the stream. It was quite away from the course we had resolved on, but that did not occur to us, or if it had, we would not have cared. It was upon the top of a little rise where the trees were open around like the corner of a park that has been forgotten.

"Here we nursed our friend, I know not for how many days. For some time we had noticed that at night Gallay shivered and we had dreaded fever. Now we knew we were right. The shock of fright had simply served to scatter his resistance so the fever could have full sway. His skin grew so hot and dry it seemed to burn our fingers. Often he shook so with chill that Abbémon and I would lie naked by him to warm him with our bodies. He was no longer delirious, but was so weak he could scarcely make his lips move to form words. However, it was evident the fever had driven from his mind all remembrance of the snake that had so nearly driven him mad.

"Abbémon and I took turn about sitting near

him and while one watched the other worked to make the resting place more habitable. We made a proper camp. It was the first we had had since our escape into the forest. Till now we had been driven by senseless haste toward our elusive destination, had begrudged the time it would have taken.

"We wove vines and laced them over forked sticks driven into the ground with stones and in that way constructed a bed upon which Gallay could lie in comparative comfort. We thatched a canopy above him with the enormous leaves of the bush cabbage so the rain did not drive through, cleared the ground of thorns and leaves and pounded it level with our hands, climbed trees to break off orchids and hung the rotted branches on which they grew so our friend could see them from his bed. We knew he would like that. And at last we made a fire. It was a business of days to find dry wood, powdered pith, and make a bow with which we could whirl one stick against another until a spark flew out. But we did it. After that we tended the fire continually and cooked the meat we caught. Twice Abbémon returned to the stream and brought back vine-nets filled with fish. Soon the clearing on the hilltop had become a home to us. We had stones and sticks in fortunate shapes that comprised our store of tools, we made snares for birds, and were happy. For Gallay was slowly mending.

"We pulled him through. The fever grudgingly cooled away and though it left him gaunt and prostrate he lived. Gradually he learned to walk again, to talk with us, even to help a little now and then

about our crude camp. His old gallantry and his gift of laughter had not gone.

"That white, tremulous boy with his mane of golden hair and the pale blue eyes that shone with so deep a luster when he looked at us—that is a picture cut deep in my mind. . . During his illness Abbémon had made us all queer coarse shirts of woven palm bark. Gallay wore one of these and at night he would sit cross-legged close to our red fire, there in the great dark forest, would throw his head back and recite two triolets he had conceived during the time of his sickness. He spoke them over and over again, made us say them after him, for he said we must remember them till we could write them down. Even I knew they were not good. They compared not at all to those he had written at St. Laurent. But we praised them more than if Villon had written them. I could say them over now. It is curious that they are the only verses of Gallay's that I remember.

"*We* must later write them down, he said. Not he. It was that old conviction of his that he would not reach home. His cowardice, he said, lay in a fear of life, a fear greater than most men's fear of death. Abbémon and I laughed at his doubts, assured him that since he had come this far safely he would of course go on with us the little way that must remain. But we did not believe the things we said. . .

"We did not go back and attempt again to follow the bed of the stream, though we were certain that was the safest guidance we had for reaching the coast. When we went on again Abbémon and I

led back *toward* the creek but not to it and tried as best we could to follow the direction in which it flowed. Each night when Gallay was asleep either the priest or I would slip quietly away through the darkness to find the waterway and verify our course. Our progress was heartbreakingly slow. Gallay could scarcely walk unless one or the other of us was near to extend a supporting hand when he had need of it. We rested twenty times a day. We did not mind at all, but Gallay blamed himself, regretted that he had become a brake to our progress.

"At the end of a week we came to a steep rise that took us to the summit of a hill that rose abruptly from the surrounding level ground. I had been to the stream the night before and believed we would shorten our path by cutting directly across its summit. Besides, an eminence was to be welcomed for the opportunity it gave of permitting a survey of the surrounding country across the treetops. We reached the top at dusk and slept that night in clean cool air.

"In the morning the sun rose with vivid radiance and through gaps in the branches we saw the blue and cloudless sky. A short search revealed a spiny sand-box tree on the very highest bit of land, and the vines around it gave handhold of a sort. I wrapped my feet with grasses and began to swarm up. In a few moments I clung precariously to a bending limb that jutted far above the level of the trees. I could see for many, many miles in all directions. My eyes strained till they hurt to discover some break in the monotony that would give me

an inkling of where the towns lay. I was rewarded. Far, far to the north I could discern a stretch of clearing. From this great distance I could not be sure. It might be a savannah. I did not think so. The borders of the open place had a regularity which must be man-made. My heart pounded. To see better I climbed still farther out on the branch till my weight caused it to crack ominously where it joined the tree. I did not heed. I now saw a tiny fleck of white glaring in the sun and knew it must be a house. I cast up in my mind the faint recollections I had of descriptions of Suriname and craned for verification of a special memory. I found it.

"Beyond the clearing I faintly discerned a slowly winding cleft between the trees, such as a river makes. However, the cut was narrow and I knew that only the widest rivers are open to the sun. The giant trees roof over narrow watercourses. That dark line I saw could only be one thing, the railroad!

"In another moment I was on the ground and Abbémon and I were dancing a tarantella of shouting abandon at my news. It was a great moment, I assure you. More than seven months had passed since the night we filed quietly down the corridor at St. Laurent and out into the concealing dark. Now, at last and for the first time, we knew definitely where we were. Though the railway lay many days' journey farther on, we could surely reach it. There, there would be white men, shelter, food, clothes, and the beginning of life again. We

could easily verify our direction by again observing from trees.

"We were impatient to be off. We laughed and joked like schoolboys. Tears started with the hysteria of our joy. All the sufferings of the past and the agony of our cruelly tortured bodies were forgotten. Privation had thrust us to the grave's brink. We stood there then. But we knew we could leap over. We began to plunge and stumble forward. Gallay interrupted us.

"He stood leaning against the white trunk of the sand-box tree in that graceful, actorlike pose of his I had seen so often. One hand was on his hip, the other gestured a little. One foot was flat upon the ground, the knee of the other leg a little bent.

" 'My friends,' he said, 'listen to me. Listen very carefully and please do not interrupt. I did not sleep well last night. I was cold. Colder than the night. This morning, therefore, I am tired, and should like,' he paused an instant, 'and I should like very much indeed to rest a long, long while. The fever . . . I think . . . has come back again. And it wearies me. You must not wait for me. I have held you back too long already. Besides, the rest . . . the rest I want will take more time than any have. You, my dear friends, least of all. Don't argue with me. Talk wearies me, wearies me and makes me still more tired. I want . . . please . . . to say good-by. You, Pierre, still have my sonnets and my triolets all safe?' I nodded dumbly. 'Yes? Then everything is quite, quite well. Good-by, my friends!'

"He extended both his hands, white, long-fin-

gered hands, and with a million words of contradiction crowding to our lips we leaped forward to take those hands in ours. He stood not ten feet from where we still stupidly paused as when he had called us. Before we reached him the bent knee had crumpled down, the flung-back golden head tipped forward and he fell limply in our arms.

"For a ghastly instant we thought he was dead. But he was not. His fine heart, though it was slow, still beat beneath his gaunt breast. When we touched him we knew, though, he was right. The fever had come back. His flesh burned with dry, consuming flame.

"We did not start that day toward the railroad nor yet the day after. We knelt on the summit of that hill beside our friend and bathed his body vainly with cool water from black puddles on the ground.

"Toward twilight of the second day, when the eternal shadows of the jungles thickened and the quiet of that long day slowly grew into the chaos of the sounds of night, our friend's moist lips grew dry. When the night came up at last, he was dead. Just for an instant before he died consciousness had come back. With a lovely smile he opened his blue eyes to look into ours. We had time, Abbémon and I, each of us, to lean down and kiss him on the mouth. Then he was gone.

"In the utter blackness of the jungle night we groped in silence on the ground and with our fingers dug a hole and laid him in. We did not want the ants and beasts to reach him first.

"There was no sleep that night. Abbémon, the

giant and the blasphemer, perhaps because he was weak from long fatigue, wept like a woman. His sobs came in stifled coughs from his great lungs.

"When the next day came all enthusiasm had gone out of us. It was with heavy feet we turned into the forest tangle to make our way to the little white house that but a few hours before had held such glorious promise.

"For the first time since the escape I took the lead. Abbémon walked behind me like an old man in a dream. He had changed utterly. For the first time I realized he was no longer young. His dark, straight hair that hung to his shoulders was almost gray. The tangled beard that covered his throat was grizzled. His mouth that had always laughed and been so ready to bellow his precious Latin songs and the dirty ditties his ladies taught him in his chapel at Toulouse, had loosened and was tired. He towered above me and his hairy chest was barrel-like, but I felt I could have struck him and he would have fallen and not risen again.

"All that day he lagged behind me. He was so spiritless that once he did not lift his hand to catch a whiplike bramble I had pressed aside to make the way. It struck him angrily across the cheeks and he did not know, I think, that it had struck him.

"You must not think that I was callous. I made our path, ploddingly, because it was my business to make the path. It was my business to live, even though my friend had died. Late that afternoon I made some remark to Abbémon. When he did not answer I turned around. He stood with his back toward me in the shadow of a tree. He did not

seem to hear me when I called. I went to him and touched him on the arm to rouse him. Then he looked down at me.

" 'Pierre,' he said, 'I am sorry. You must go on alone. I am going back there—to the hilltop, to my friend.' With that, with some of the old activity, he whirled about and strode away.

"For a moment I stood speechless and then began to call. But he did not stop. I had lost sight of him at once in the matted tangle and the gathering gloom. But I could hear the crackle of the branches as he walked. I ran after him. But the way back was no less hard than the way we had come, and my strength had gone out of me in this moment of last despair. I tripped and stumbled and fell and called aloud. But he did not answer and in another moment the last sounds he made had faded away and it was dark.

"All that night I roamed about, heedless of the beasts I knew were all around. All night I called my friend. But there was nothing but the night, the silent trees, and emptiness. Toward morning, I think, I called Gallay. I had forgotten he had gone, I was so tired. At last I lay down and slept. When I awoke the sun was straight above the green branches overhead and I knew I should never find my friend."

LeBrun's pipe was out. He held it limply in his hand and stared moodily to where the river flickered palely with the coming of the day. The night had passed.

At last he roused himself again and lifted up his head.

"There is no more to tell, M'sieu. You see me here. . . After that I climbed a tree, saw the white house much nearer and the dark line the railroad made where it wound downward toward the town. I reached the house and a kind black woman took me in. She forgave me my nakedness, my snarled and dirty hair, and took pity on the caverns in my cheeks. She took me in and fed me. She nursed me through three long weeks of fever and delirium when I talked aloud in the night and declaimed the triolets Gallay had told me I must not forget. She clothed me and helped me to find work. . ." LeBrun's voice trailed off and he was quiet.

"It is nearly dawn, my friend. You have been most patient to hear me through. Perhaps now you would be glad to go up to the big house and rest awhile until the others are ready for breakfast."

The old man rose and extended his hand. Then he turned and stood staring to the high, black wall of the jungle beyond, where the pearl of the dawn streaked it. He stood there very quietly for a long time, gazing straight ahead.

And so I left him. . .

[DJOMBÉ RIVER]

THE concession bungalow stood on the crest of a low hill which rose above the common level of the woods, so from the long verandah Totton could look westward across forty miles of unbroken forest. Only at rare intervals did the higher branches of some monster tree vary the smooth surface of the jungle roof. In the shadows of late afternoon and when the gray rains beat down the panorama was like a dark and undulant meadowland.

Half a mile below the hill Djombé River ran between towering walls of verdure, and around a bend upstream snarled down a steep cascade. Djombé River had decided the selection of the concession. In the roadless and sparsely peopled land it was the one highway. On its changes with the seasons depended every incident of life. In that colossal, voiceless, waiting world Djombé alone had mood and living force. It came from the great unknown lands of Africa where none had ever been, swept with unhalting grandeur through the

dark woods, and eternally kept on. Never for an hour could one forget or disregard it. Totton could hear the murmuring, warning voice of Djombé's waters borne on every wind.

There were no white settlements nearer than the port of Molala 250 miles away, a hard twelve days' foot journey through the forest. Except for a few natives who lived within the limits of the huge timber grant over which he ruled, Totton saw no one from one year's end to the next. When he rode his logs down-river to the coast at the commencement of each long dry season, it was his custom to reoutfit and return immediately to the bungalow. He had been a woodsman all his life, in Michigan, in Bolivia, in Siam, and at last in the West African Gaboon, and an isolation that for another man would have held endless terror and despair was for Geoffery Totton a not unfriendly commonplace. He had his house, his work, and always the power and melody of Djombé River near at hand. In middle age he had arranged the plan of his life.

He had lived alone on the hill for eight years before the work of the concession grew too considerable to cope with by himself. At his request the company had then sent out Eugene Bryce to act as his assistant. Twenty-five years' difference in age and experience kept them from deep intimacy, but for twelve months they had lived together in the bungalow.

* * *

Totton came onto the verandah and with hands deep in the pockets of his faded khaki trousers

looked out under the overhanging thatch. The long drought had broken in a thunderous rain that streamed down from a lowering sky. It had rained all the early afternoon, but now at sunset the piling clouds were mumbling away southward. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees and the jungle below him, shining gold and green amid the flowing shadows of the sunset, seemed to stir with renewed vitality. Grass clumps in the yard bent and whispered in a fragrant wind.

Totton walked down the moist clay path to a patent rain gauge which stood on a post near the hibiscus hedge. He looked at the indicator and nodded. The reading confirmed his guess. He flung the water on the ground and carefully readjusted the iron cups.

He lifted his head and listened attentively. Djombé River, he knew from long experience, rose quickly when the rains began. The hour of dusk always gave curious clarity to sounds, but surely the distant roar of the falls was louder than it had been in the morning. . . He'd better send young Gene down both banks first thing tomorrow to see that none of the squared timbers had been put too close to flood-line. It was a nuisance when they were carried away. . . How quiet it was. His eyes followed the evening flight of parrots, dark specks that moved with swallow's swiftness toward the distant sea. The far echo of their cawing came down the sky to him. . .

Behind him the squat mass of the bungalow was already dark. Some one came onto the verandah with a lantern.

"That you, Gene?" Totton asked. There was no need to call, so far did voices carry.

"Sure thing!"

"You'd better tell Aloki to put the net over the table. That rain's sure to bring out all the bugs tonight."

Bryce hung the lantern on a hook and came down the steps.

"I've already told him, Jeff. How much did it rain?"

"I figure it about an inch. Maybe a little less."

"I didn't think it was as much as that. I suppose, then, I'd better have a look downstream tomorrow?" Bryce suggested.

"I was just going to tell you."

They fell silent, together watched the dwindling roseate torches in the west and the swift approach of night.

Totton was tall, broad-shouldered, and wirily built. He carried his fifty-one years with casual ease. Bryce was shorter, stouter and twenty-five. His skin, unlike the older man's, had not darkened in the equatorial sun.

Aloki, their negro servant, came onto the porch trailing a quantity of white net. As he worked, dragging a chair with him and tying strings to hooks under the roof, the shapeless whiteness in the lantern glow became a square gauze cabin.

Bryce groped in a breast pocket for cigarettes, took one and lit it. He nodded over his shoulder.

"Robinson Crusoe notched a stick, but I can tell time from that blamed thing. I've been here just a

year. Remember the night I set fire to it with a butt?" He waved his cigarette.

"You shouldn't smoke, Gene," Totton said soberly. "Save your money instead."

Bryce laughed, found no adequate reply.

Totton nodded. "All right. All right. Do as you like." He slapped his own cheek. "Here they come. Let's get inside."

They walked slowly toward the house. A sickle moon had shown above the horizon and the top of the forest was painted in a tarnished silver radiance. A faint clatter of dishes from the cook-house behind the bungalow, the distant roar of the falls, and the faint shrilling of cicadas in the wood were the only sounds in all their world. . . A cool breeze, born behind the sunset, whispered through the treetops, stirred the grass-clumps, and, ghostly, lulled away, leaving the night still again.

They stopped at the foot of the three board steps. Bryce flipped his cigarette away. It made an arc of tiny flame and vanished. "All very pretty, Jeff, but how have you stood it?"

Totton spoke slowly, spacing his words with queer precision. "You're restless because you're a kid and this job isn't your last. It is mine."

"Rot!"

Totton shook his head. "Don't say that. It is."

Bryce's face lighted. "Oh, I get you. Well, that's a good ambition."

"It's mine. I'm tired. I've had thirty years of the tropics and it's time for some other kind of life. I want to see some people."

"Some women, huh?"

Totton considered. "I don't think so. Not especially. Not when you get as old as me."

Gene took him affectionately by the arm. "Glad to hear that, Grandpa! You'll be safe to have around the house then, if my girl comes out."

Bare feet padded softly along the boards and stopped behind them.

Jeff turned. "Chop ready?"

"Chop ready, massa." Aloki disappeared into the dim interior of the house.

* * *

The net hung at the corner of the porch where, if breezes stirred, they would find it. The home-made wooden table with its plates of steaming soup, the two straight chairs and the shaded lamp were inside. As they finished each course they put the dirty dishes on the floor and Aloki slid fresh courses under the net to them. Most white men in Gaboon kept two boys, one inside the net and another out, but Totton thought that a needless extravagance. It was not much, certainly—a servant cost two dollars and a half a month—but one got on well enough without. And Aloki, silent, lanky and wonderfully tattooed, was exceptionally efficient.

They said little until the meal was over. There was rarely very much to say. When the man began to clear away each went to his own room to find materials for the occupation of the evening—books, or playing cards, or pen and paper. Days on the concession began by morning starlight so the after supper hours were not formidable.

Bryce reappeared with a tin writing box. Tot-

ton, elbows on table and the fingers of his left hand tangled in his sandy hair, leafed through the pages of a heavy ledger, compared it with a smaller book, made occasional notations.

Bryce broke a long silence. "Listen, Jeff." He leaned back in his chair and blew smoke meditatively toward the gauze ceiling. Totton's eyes lifted at once and he struggled to impart a look of friendly interest to his impassive face. A year with the younger man had given him an unhappy sense of his own failure as a companion. They liked each other well enough, but he felt his taciturnity, the accumulated speechlessness of the solitary years that loomed behind him had withered all intimate, important speech. He tried to think of something kind to say, failed, and kept silent. The affairs of the younger man did not interest him. They were so remote and affected him so little. Gene bored him sometimes.

Bryce cleared his throat uneasily. "Remember before supper I made a crack about my girl coming out? I wasn't altogether kidding. Maybe she will."

He stroked his round chin. "I've just been reading her letters over"—he indicated a pile of worn envelopes on the table—"and maybe I better tell you about it."

Totton lodged a brown forefinger as placemarker in the book before him. "Go ahead."

"I don't want to bore you with my own personal affairs. But I've done something that you ought to know about. . . I don't know as you'll remember. . . I must have told you something about

her. . . Anyway, Marion and I've known each other about all our lives, but we weren't engaged or anything till I got out of Forestry School at Syracuse. I worked then for a while, you know, for the State Park Commission and lived at home."

"You've asked her out here?"

"Yes, in a way. . ." Bryce reddened. "Give me a chance. . . Her father, old Doctor Crawley, is a little queer. He used to be the best physician in our part of the Catskills, but he's old and fussy now. Marion's mother died when she was a little girl and she's sort of taken care of him all her life. And he never goes out and won't let her much either. So when we got engaged we didn't tell anybody. I guess we both knew we couldn't marry or anything till her old man died.

"Well"—Gene put his elbows on the table and shielded his eyes from the lamp—"well, a few months ago I got to thinking. Suppose Crawley died now—what would she do? She hardly knows anybody but me and I betcha' Crawley's never saved any money. . . So I wrote her a letter and told her if anything happened—I put it that way, understand?—she was to cable me and come right out here. . . She's awfully nice, Jeff. And I can't think of anything she'd rather do than come to Africa. She's never been anywhere and all this"—he waved one hand vaguely toward the outside dark—"would be great to her. You'd like her, Jeff. She'd had such a devil of a life any fellow'd be sorry for her. . . I hope you're not sore, Jeff?"

"Why, no."

Bryce's round, faintly girlish face lifted and he

leaned back. He fumbled in his shirt pocket for a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his throat. There was no longer any wind and the night was hot. "When do you figure the runner from Molala will be here?"

Totton stroked the hollow of one cheek with a rigid forefinger. "Tomorrow or next day, I guess. Unless the river holds him up . . . Why?"

"Maybe there's a letter from Marion. Last one, eight weeks ago, she said the doctor was pretty bad. And the mails are so slow anything may happen. . ." Bryce looked appealingly across the table. "Listen, will it be all right, Jeff? With you, I mean? I should have said something long ago, I suppose."

Totton carefully closed his two ledgers and laid one on the other. "I couldn't think of anything righter." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Anything at all I can do, I guess you know me well enough. . ." He rose stiffly to his feet, keeping his head cautiously bent to avoid contact with the net. "We can talk about it some more when you get your next letter. . . Good night."

"Thanks, Jeff . . . I'm going to sit up a little while longer."

Totton groped for the bottom of the mosquito bar and stooped under. The boards of the verandah creaked as he walked away.

Eugene idly finished his cigarette and ground it out in a dirty saucer. His young, pudgy hand hovered undecidedly over the pile of letters and then fell into his lap. He knew everything in them. There was no point in going over the same ground

all over again. . . He pursed his lips to whistle, after a few notes tapered to a halt. The sound of his own voice suddenly let into his consciousness again that vast, pervading voice that never ceased. Djombé River far away in the darkness seemed to fill the solitude with a sound as of the beating of immense gray wings. . . The jungle night closed in on him like a huge and sweaty hand. With timorous fingers he gathered his things, took up the lamp and went into the house to bed.

* * *

Aloki and the cook lived in a huddled town of mud and bamboo huts that had come casually into existence down the hill behind the bungalow. Succeeding cooks and house boys since the establishment of the concession had brought their families, run up their shabby hovels in the shelter of the high forest wall, and had failed to move away. Totton did not mind. The village gave the hill a friendly, remotely populous air and it supplied useful laborers.

Aloki had a tin alarm clock which broke into palsied dissonance beside his head at five each morning. Coming to the doorway of his hut he blew three braying notes on a greasy buffalo horn and the two white men at the bungalow, hearing it, awoke and set about their day. . .

At five-thirty Aloki brought coffee, fried yams and bread to the verandah table and the two men ate. They considered drowsily the food remnants on the plates. Totton broke silence.

"Look here, Gene. That messenger will probably

show up some time this morning and you'll want to see your mail right away. Why don't you cut those small mahoganys above the falls? Then Aloki can run down and tell you when the boy comes. I'll make fast downstream. No use in your going so far."

"Thanks, old man."

Totton went into the house and came out with a ragged cork helmet on his head. His heavy boots clattered down the steps, crunched in the earth of the path. In a moment he had gone down the hill.

Behind the bungalow the sun was rising and the darkness swiftly brightened to an orange glow. Bryce lit a second cigarette and called Aloki for more coffee.

It would seem strange, he reflected, to have Marion at the bungalow. If things should work out that way. He ran his fingers through his wispy yellow hair. Golly, it would seem funny. . . What a contrast Africa would be for her. Poor kid. . . She'd had a pretty monotonous, empty time of it. . . At home she had hardly any friends. In a way, that would be all to the good. She wouldn't be bothered so much by the loneliness. . .

Aloki brought the coffee in a crackled zinc pot streaked with woodsmoke. He poured it and went away. Bryce leaned over to drink and the warm steam rose into his face. He sneezed slightly and his eyes dimmed. He kept his head bent. His lips trembled.

There was no getting round it, the year at the bungalow had been pretty bad . . . with no fun,

no girls, no one to talk to. . . There was Jeff, of course.

Gene looked out into the clear morning. There wasn't a finer man alive than Jeff, but . . . but—an idea came to him with sudden clarity. But Jeff had everything in order. He knew just what he was going to do. That was the great difference between them, the thing that kept them apart. . . Perhaps with Marion he and she could figure something, too.

Bryce finished his coffee, found his helmet and walked slowly along the narrow forest trail toward the falls. The jungle was so dense he could not see Djombé River until he thrust aside the giant ferns and grasses. But the sound of the rush and wash of the water where the swollen flood bent over black stones was so compelling that unconsciously he quickened his pace.

One always seemed to come upon Djombé River suddenly, so gigantic was the snarl and shock of it. With lips parted and vaguely frightened eyes he gazed at the sweeping yellow torrent between the high, still walls of green. . . He laughed ruefully.

Djombé River had plans.

* * *

Totton's laborers, a shivering, sleepy group of negroes in dirty loin cloths, were waiting for him in the gloomy shadows near the river bank. Shapeless dark figures in the dark, they sat quiet until he had passed them, then rose and followed.

At this point Djombé River narrowed and a trough-shaped bridge of woven vines swung high

above the current. The structure was suspended from the branches of trees by myriad extensions of the liana ropes. One climbed up to it by a rough ladder of exposed roots. His hands holding the loose, sheerly sloping sides, Totton crossed until he stood above midstream. The negroes behind him, silent and unquestioning, stopped when he did and the creaking swing of the bridge gradually subsided. At this hour the river, catching the reflection of the dawn, ran like molten gold. Absently Totton tore off a strip of withered bark and let it zigzag down. For an instant it seemed to hover reluctantly above the shining flood, then was seized and swirled away. His gray, quiet eyes followed it and he made a slight gesture of his head, as if in friendly affirmation.

Old Djombé knew its business. There wasn't any stopping Djombé . . .

> That even the weariest river
> Winds somewhere safe to sea . . .

The savor of the unspoken words lingered with a kind of fragrance in his mouth. He grinned slightly at the poem's irrelevance. . . There wasn't much weary about Djombé River, not up here in middle course. . . Well, he was in mid-course, too. Fifty-one was nothing.

If Djombé River's destination was the sea, so it was his . . . the sea and the lands beyond it. They'd worked together pretty well, Djombé and he, and the partnership might as well go on further . . . down to the sea.

There wouldn't be much longer to wait. The

check-up of accounts the night before had shown that. There was nearly enough saved to get him away. Enough really to start life on after thirty years of saving . . . waiting. He squared his shoulders smilingly, staggered to balance again and continued over the bridge.

The timber trails all radiated from the river, none followed it, so to save time they kept along the bank, chopping through an entanglement of high grass, brambles and stunted palms. Totton kept a little ahead, hacking viciously with a machete at tripping vines.

As the sun rose the jungle steamed, by ten the heat had blanketed the land with utter stillness. They saw a sleeping python wrapped in the branches of a sapling, carefully ignored it and kept on. Once a gorilla jumped screaming from concealment and flung away across a clearing into a bamboo brake. Sweat poured down Totton's cheeks, his shirt grew clammy, his boots squshed with water. He was panting and one forearm bore a long, red, oozing scratch. Yet he was filled with a sense of immense well-being.

He hoped Gene's girl did come out, he thought. Be kind of interesting. He seized a vine overhead with one arm, with a grunt swung himself high into the air and safe across the bulk of an old fallen tree. Fifty-one was nothing! He'd like to see any youngster do better than that!

They reached the first of the clearings where the squared logs were piled. The margin of the flood already lipped the lower round and the natives set at once to work, Totton standing apart to direct.

Djombé River had already crept a dozen feet up the sloping bank. Jeff swung his boot through the lapping shallows and a fan of silver water rainbowed in the sun. He smiled with grim friendliness. What a fierce old bastard of a river it was! Never let you forget it, never. But it was fun to see who'd win. . .

* * *

Totton returned to Bungalow Hill—Lolill, the natives called it—in mid-afternoon two days later. Bryce, to his mild surprise, came hurrying down the yard, his pink face a confusion of emotions. He called out when they were still twenty feet apart.

"She's coming, Jeff! . . . I guess I had a mental wave or something. . ." His tone changed with sudden concern. "You look tired, old boy, have hard going?" His hand hovered to take Totton's arm, then dropped ashamedly to his side.

"You go to hell, young fellow!"

He sat on the top step, stretched out his muddy legs and leaned back on his elbows. Bryce stood facing him.

"Get your letter?"

"Yes." He had lost eagerness. "Got a letter three weeks old and a cable seven weeks old. And believe me, not any too soon, either of 'em. I got to start for Molala tomorrow first thing, Jeff. I ought to have started yesterday, but I didn't know where I could locate you. . ."

"Get the logs down?"

Bryce stroked his hair carefully back from his

forehead. "I got some of them, Jeff. But I've been kind of busy since I got the letters. I've been packing and . . . good Lord, any boss'll give a fellow a day off to get married!"

Totton nodded, eyes on his boots. "Sure."

Bryce fidgeted. "I'll have to take that falls gang as carriers down and back. All right? It'll only take me about a month both ways. You can get on, can't you?"

Totton nodded again. "How do you figure a month? You mean she's on her way now? Right now?"

Gene ran up the steps, went into the bungalow and came out with the despatch box. He sat on the top step and took out a cable form. "Look at this."

Totton took it. "Am coming SS Fernand Vaz thank you Marion" it read. Curious to say "Thank you" in a cable.

"The letter," Bryce lifted a fat envelope, "got to Molala later, but she sent it long before, of course. Funny we should have figured it out so close, talking the other night. You can't tell me there isn't anything in this thought-wave. . ." He stopped, gazed abstractedly into the shimmering brightness of the afternoon. "Well, anyway, her old man had been buried a week when my letter got there. Passed out from a hemorrhage in his head somewhere. . ."

"She says"—he wiggled the envelope in the air —"my letter"—he blushed self-consciously— "came just at the right minute. She'd been to see Mr. Hewitt, he's a lawyer, and she'd found there wasn't any money. Hewitt himself had owned their

house for years, he told her, and hadn't said anything. . . Anyway, she wrote to say she'd take me up."

There was a pause. Totton still considered his boots. Bryce, dampened, got to his feet. "Well, as near as I can figure it out, the Fernand Vaz gets in in about two weeks. I'll just about catch it if I start tomorrow. Then we'll come straight back here." He stopped. The faint roar of the falls seemed to fill the pause insistently.

"Wish to God she'd picked another time of year. That river's getting pretty high."

Totton roused himself. "I guess you can make it. . ." He craned his head around to look up into Bryce's face. "Look here, Gene." He slapped the boarding lightly with his palm. "Sit down another minute. . .

"Tell you what I'll do. By the time you get back here I'll have found a nice site near here somewheres on the Hill for a new bungalow. For you and the Missis. Maybe I'll cut a little brush, but that's all. I'll wait till you and she get back to look things over and decide."

"That'll be fine, Jeff."

Totton held up a hand. "Wait a minute. That's just a suggestion, not anything I'm doing. But I thought out another thing while I was away. You remember the other day I said this was my last job. That I was planning to quit? Well, I've figured the money even closer and I'm settled in my mind now I'm leaving the end of the next Long Dries . . . What I mean is, you can have my job. The pay's a little better and you two ought to get on

fine." . . He hesitated. "That's all the wedding present I'll be able to give you. You know why. I don't smoke, I don't drink and"—he lifted one long, ragged leg—"when I get through with a pair of pants there isn't a loin cloth for a Ubanghi pygmy left in 'em. I'm quitting!"

Bryce had struggled with contradicting moods. . . Grateful he surely was . . . yet in the offer there was a quality of sentence, of terrifying permanence. He began to stutter his thanks and was cut short.

"Sure. . . If you're going in the house tell Aloki I want a hot bath."

* * *

They stood in the dewy darkness near the hedge. The fourteen carriers were already well ahead along the trail.

The two men shook hands.

"Any errands, Jeff?"

"Nothing I can think of. Give my regards to Judge Morin when you see him. You'd better let him marry you."

"I'll do that. So long."

"So long."

* * *

Bryce reached Molala at dusk the twelfth day from Lolill. The slovenly French traders and some officials of the port were already gathering on the latticed concrete terrace of the Hotel Grand. The pounding of a hidden donkey engine that supplied the current to the festoons of electric bulbs min-

gled with the clink of glasses and the hum of voices. Bryce, footsore, soggy with sweat and the violent rain of the last afternoon, surveyed the scene with a vague smile of anticipation.

He found the manager and was given a bleak, pink-kalsomined room under the tin roof. In an hour, shaved, bathed and dressed in a suit of trunk-wrinkled whites, he came down and stood hesitant on the last step. The narrow open terrace, the bare bulbs, the people, the hurrying negro waiters and behind all the looming shadow of the equatorial dark gave him a sense of deep excitement. The only other time he had seen it, on his arrival from America, he had been contemptuous. But the year had made a difference. He sought self-consciously for a familiar face.

A loud, unctuously rounded voice hailed him by name and he turned to see a stocky figure disengaging itself nimbly from a confusion of chairs about a table. It was Jeff's friend Morin, Judge of the Molala Circonscription.

They shook hands. Bryce was swept into the circle on a wave of volubility, and while Morin's introductions alternated confusedly between French and English, he eyed the group with furtive curiosity. The men, apparently, were officials, the two fat women with sticky powder on their throats were obviously wives. The blonde girl on his left, with the high cheek bones, red lips and appraising eyes, he couldn't quite place. He took the chair some one scraped forward and examined her through the corner of his eye.

Morin caught the look. "Mademoiselle Nelly,

Monsieur Bryce," he explained in a voice audible the length of the café, "you do not know, has been proposed for a ribbon of the Legion?"

"That so?"

The others paused expectantly. "For distinguished colonial service. She has kept more men in Gaboon than palm oil."

The girl, her smile undamaged, flicked Morin's cheek with a soiled handkerchief and spat a swift French sentence at him. The group roared with laughter.

A hatchet-faced young man leaned forward. "Monsieur, you have come from the interior? Have the rains begun?"

Bryce nodded. "Yes, sir. They're early this year. I've never seen Djombé quite so high this time before."

The questioner nodded gratefully and relaxed.

Judge Morin explained again. "Monsieur is the Chief of the Marine."

The conversation flooded back into the channels of the more familiar tongue and left Gene stranded. In a moment the café boy brought a bottle of White Horse and a tall tumbler of ice. He poured and drank slowly to cover his awkwardness. After a whole year of no one but Jeff it made him feel clumsy-handed to be with strangers.

He became conscious that the girl next to him was eyeing him, favorably, he felt. He turned.

"I spik English," she whispered.

Bruce bent nearer, his placid face flushed. Electric lights, ice and a swell blonde!

"He says," she nodded with an air of tolerant

proprietorship toward Morin, "that for one year you have been in the bōōsh? So?"

Bryce agreed, bracing his shoulders a little. She somehow made the year seem romantic.

Mademoiselle Nelly leaned across him and sloshed his glass full. Her shoulder touched his.

"How hard it must be for a fine American boy, all alone, for one year?" Her hard blue eyes glistened, calculating.

"It is, sort of."

Morin was in full career and the rest were silently attentive. The girl put her hand on Gene's arm to silence him. She listened. Occasionally her fingers tensed intimately. Bryce, once more quarantined, attained the bottom of the immense tumbler of whiskey. A fellow, he told himself somewhat elaborately, had to be fit to get through a drink like that.

Morin finished his account and said to Gene in English, "I am telling them about our friend Jeff. What a remarkable man he is. How he has a fixed idea. That he has sacrificed all, women, pleasure, everything, that he may one day live. How relentlessly—how shall I say it?—he has postponed life. It is true, is it not? Yes." Morin's voice had leveled, was streaked with somber envy.

"I guess that's so."

Bryce's head was swimming. They smiled at him and went on with their talk. The girl edged her chair closer. Her white-stockinged, muscular leg touched his.

"You stay in Molala a long time?"

He looked at her, striving to make each glance conquering. His eyes felt hot.

"Not so long. I just came down to meet the mail boat, then I'm going right back. I sort of have to hurry home, now the river's rising. The trail keeps on crossing it. . . I'm meeting a . . . a fellow." he added. He blinked. Why had he said that? Well, it was none of their business.

"The *Fernand Vaz*? It comes tomorrow morning. I am sōō sorry," Mademoiselle murmured. Her head was so close he could feel her warm breath. Her reddened lips moved stealthily, with infinite suggestion.

He gaped at her, recovered himself and they began to talk together in low tones.

A platter of sandwiches was brought and Bryce ate with such stumbling greediness they laughed at him. Now and then, like a rhyme, the words "Marion—mailboat — tomorrow" would bubble through his mind and with a petulant thrust he would put the matter away. There was plenty of time for that. The hours waned.

A phonograph played and a half dozen couples danced between the tables, feet scraping sandily on the cement. Nelly had fierce ardor when she danced, she alone among the women on the floor did not sweat greasily on forehead, upper lip and in a slow rivulet down the groove between her breasts. She told Gene he danced better than any man in Gaboon. She smiled her admiration at the American gift for drinking whiskey instead of wine.

The gramophone at last gurgled to a halt and

the hotel manager ostentatiously slammed down the lid. One by one the people at the other tables finished their drinks and went away. At eleven the string of bulbs dimmed to an orange glow, blazed to sudden whiteness and went out. The pounding of the distant donkey engine wheezed to silence. A smoky lantern at the foot of the stairs that led to the upper rooms made a splotch of dim light in the darkness.

The curfew was accepted uncritically. The two wives had been yawning with stout abandon for some time. They rose. All shook hands elaborately.

"Come to the Tribunal tomorrow," Judge Morin urged. "We will lunch together and talk." The deep shadows of the sleeping town enveloped them. The voices faded away. Feet crunched faintly in the gravel road between the bordering palms, became inaudible.

Gene stood by the steps, swaying slightly. With vague confusion he realized Mademoiselle Nelly still remained.

She took his arm familiarly. "You stay in this hotel, too, *hein*?" She kept one arm linked with his but stretched with the other, leaning back her head so the coarse bobbed hair hung in a massy silhouette behind.

"I am sōō sleepy," she murmured. "Let us go up."

An oily whirlpool of alcohol swam round again in Bryce's head. They climbed the stairs in silence. Caution was needed not to stumble. His heart beat with an insistent thudding. With meticulous care

he wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"That's the worst of the coast towns," he explained. "Up in the bush you get a good cool breeze in the evenings, anyway."

Mademoiselle Nelly did not reply.

The narrow upper hallway was illumined only by a tiny night wick on a table. Gene reached the door of his own room, by unflexing his elbow disengaged his arm.

"Good night, Mam'selle. I certainly appreciate having met you."

"You not kiss me?" She moved close to him. His pent-up breath released with a faint moan and his arms went round her. Her mouth was soft, compelling.

She stirred against him with a motion that flung the blood booming in his temples.

"We make love, *hein*?" she whispered. "After one long year?" He closed her mouth with his lips, nodding.

The knob of the bedroom door was just behind. They turned and stumbled in.

* * *

Gene came drowsily awake at dawn. The patch of sky through the unglazed window was a radiant blue and across it trailed rose-gray wisps of cloud. The subdued voices of the hotel servants came up from the yard below. There was everywhere a sense of stir and joy and summer morning. His eyes opened and surveyed the yellowed, ragged mosquito net on its suspended frame.

Damn it, he thought. Forgot to put it down. What a fool trick. Have a shot of fever sure. He stretched, conscious of a delicious sense of relaxation. In mid-stretch he remembered, with a jerk sat upright and swung his feet to the floor. He glanced hastily around the room. She'd gone.

Good Lord! The clarity of the first waking instant grayed into a dull confusion. His eyes dimmed with shame, self-pity, and, uncontrollably, his lips curled with pride. He found his watch amid the pile of clothes on the floor. 6:15. He jumped up.

Jesus, there was no telling how soon the boat would be in. He went to the window and looked out. The harbor was hidden by the green tops of palms.

A cracked mirror hung over the washstand and for a long minute he examined his flushed face and tousled yellow hair. The image smirked back reassuringly.

"Oh, what the hell!" he said aloud. The sound of his own voice made him redden. He bellowed into space for the house boy to run a bath and bring breakfast to his room.

* * *

An hour later, in a clean suit, his helmet wetly blue from fresh pipe-claying, Gene emerged in the hot morning sunlight of the deserted terrace. Two café waiters in white uniforms sat dozing against the stucco wall, their brown faces turned imperturbably to the sun.

He hesitated, looked doubtfully down the shady road. A ragged negro passed with a wheelbarrow,

then a fat little Frenchman in moist negligee shirt and *cloche* helmet. Gene found a cigarette, lit it and smoked it halfway through. Then he flung it into the road and sought the manager of the hotel.

He arranged for a second bedroom. Under the circumstances. Only for a couple of nights, at most, he explained with needless care. He was expecting a friend, a lady. Djombé River was rising, they couldn't fool around down here.

He left the hotel again and sauntered through the shaded streets toward the waterfront. The clerk of the steamship office was breakfasting behind the lattice of an upstairs verandah. The orange stripes of his pajamas and his gray face showed weirdly through the slatted squares. In halting English he shouted down the necessary information.

The *Fernand Vaz* had arrived off the bar at daybreak. The tug would reach the quay by nine.

Gene thanked him, followed a steep path that led between two warehouses to the waterfront and found a place at the end of the mail wharf where he could wait. A moored lighter cast a narrow patch of shade.

Except for the intermittent babbling of a few negroes rolling palm-oil casks along the tracks in front of a trader's factory and the splutter and rattle of an occasional auto truck, Waterside was silent. The low iron sheds, the moored dugouts, the rusty, mud-trapped lighters and the withered palms seemed to shrink beneath the molten pressure of the sky. The tide ran out and the river

tugged and whispered at the loose piles of the wharf.

Struggling with a mood of depression, Bryce got up, walked over the coarse boarding and stood staring toward the sea. . . It was hard to accept that this was Djombé River, this flat, bright serenity that fanned out seaward through the dark lines of bordering mangroves. . . Once Jeff, he remembered, had said a harbor was a river in old age. . .

A speck in the distance shaped out of the heat fog and grew. Gene removed his helmet and wiped his sweating forehead with nervous care. It was the tug. Marion was coming.

A colored clerk from the post office, dressed with slightly shapeless perfection in white drill, joined him on the pier. They engaged in desultory, mutually wearisome talk. With maddening sloth the tug drew nearer. Soon they were joined by a half dozen whites, the men lank, bearded, malarial, the women too fat, too pale and powder-sticky from the heat. An amorphous, casual company of slinking natives soon filled the wharf. Waterside stirred in anticipation.

The squat tug came up and smashed creakingly against the piles so the crowd stumbled and nearly lost foothold. It drifted to position, amid a deafening confusion of shouts, made fast.

Bryce elbowed forward. A gigantic, ruddy French official in khaki and greasy helmet stepped heavily to the dock and turned aside. Marion appeared behind him.

In an instant her hands were in his.

"Hello, Gene," she said.

"Hello!" He smiled with stiff self-consciousness. Good lord, he'd forgotten how pretty she was. And she was an inch taller than he. Of course.

Her eyes—he'd never properly realized before how darkly blue they were—sought his.

Bryce's glance sped uneasily about them and he blushed hotly. The unfamiliar, noisy crowd seemed to stare and smirk. A gaping negro face came close to his for an instant. This girl who had come to marry him seemed a stranger like the rest. Her half-forgotten prettiness increased his embarrassment. A white French face leered at them and he stiffened.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" she asked.

He pecked at her mouth, was a little frightened at the clinging passion of her response. Some one brushed against them so violently they staggered. He acutely realized they were in the way.

Bryce became loudly, cheerily busy about the baggage.

No power on earth could have induced the moist *douanier* to question Madame's baggage. In a few minutes the formalities of the port were completed, and her trunks were on the way to the hotel.

They stood facing each other, smiling fleetingly, suddenly alone. The heat reflected from the iron wall of the custom's barn, from the gravel road, from their white clothes and helmets, was like the throbbing exhaust from a great machine.

She was slenderer than he and a little taller. About her small mouth there was a look of mingled childish wonder, gaiety and of an insubstan-

tial fear. There were tired, careworn little lines at the corners of her eyes. Her hips were narrow, her white hands delicate.

A thousand things were crowding to her lips, but she made him speak first.

"Shall we walk around for a while, or do you want to go up right away?" he asked.

Her eyes, wide with curiosity, drank in the scene around them. "No, indeed."

Bryce cleared his throat, on a note of gaiety which startled him by its unnecessary volume, said: "I tell you. If you haven't anything better to do just now, we might take a walk up to the Tribunal and see a friend of mine." He took her arm. "I don't know what your plans are, but I'm going to get married!"

She smiled back at him. "I wouldn't miss it for anything. I suppose I'm invited?"

With wide, elaborate gestures, a mannerism unnatural to him, Gene began to point out the streets and buildings and to name the kinds of trees.

* * *

The Tribunal of Molala, a two-story, stucco building overshadowed by big trees, smelt of sun on stone and rain-drenched leaves and ink and dust. Their feet clattered noisily in the deserted cement corridor. They reached an unvarnished wooden door marked with black letters, "*M le Juge de la Circonscription.*"

Gene lifted his hand to knock. "All set?" he whispered. His voice shook a little, uncontrollably.

"Wait a minute." She stayed his hand with her

fingers. "Gene . . . are you sure you want to . . . sure? You aren't just being sorry for me?"

He stepped back instinctively at the impassioned earnestness that overlaid the words. His shoddy, joking air fell miserably away.

"Question is, do you want to?" he said thickly. "I'm darned if I know why anyone should. . ."

"Oh, so much!"

"Here goes, then." He rapped smartly on the door.

"*Entrez!*"

Judge Morin, in moist shirt-sleeves, a limp cigarette dangling from his mouth, sat at a hacked and ink-stained table. He rose with a start of undisguised astonishment, recovered himself quickly and greeted them. He ushered them ceremoniously to seats and returned to his own chair.

As they began to explain his look traveled slowly between them. He leaned forward, hands on knees, a stout, gentle, vivid little man with thinning hair. Now and again he smiled brilliantly at Marion, occasionally interpolated a questioning word until he had it all. He succeeded in drawing forth a far more elaborate history than they had intended.

At the end Judge Morin asked a question. By his manner he somehow robbed it of any rudeness.

"Mademoiselle, if you will pardon me, at the moment how much money have you? In an emergency what amount could you possibly command? In the whole world? I feel, please, that I should like to know."

She blushed slightly. "Perhaps a hundred dollars, Judge Morin. No more."

He nodded briskly and got up. "Very well, then."

He got a dilapidated, cloth-bound book from a high shelf and indicated they should stand up. Sand-dry termites' eggs trickled from the rotting binding as he turned the pages. He stepped into the gloomy, leaf-filtered light near the open window.

Judge Morin read in rapid French, then translated each passage freely into English. They responded confusedly. At last he closed the volume, returned it to its shelf and looked at them.

"Very well. You are married then. . . My best wishes and my congratulations. This is perhaps not entirely legal and in order, but I am in a position to make it so. You are staying at the Grand? Then I will call upon you this evening for your signatures to the proper papers." He took Marion's hands.

"We do things carelessly in Africa, Madame Bryce, but we get them done." He stooped, kissed her fingertips, then straightened up again. His kind eyes seemed unwilling to let her go.

"You have come to a difficult land, my dear," he said. "It is a country of great forests, great rivers and for the most part very little human men. . . Again my best wishes. And if at any time . . . ? You understand me? I shall be here forever, I think. And always will I be at your service."

He dismissed them with a bow. They shook hands, exchanged the trivial courtesies, and Marion stepped into the corridor. Morin detained Bryce with a touch.

The judge spoke in a precise, biting undertone. "Last night, my friend, I think you were a dirty little pig. Good morning!"

* * *

The two café boys still sprawled dozing against the hotel wall. It was not yet eleven and they had not stirred.

They climbed the steps in silence. The upper corridor, chill and echoing in the shuttered daytime twilight, was deserted. Bryce fumbled with a heavy key and opened a door.

"This is your room. . . I—I've got that one over there."

She looked at him steadily and his face suffused a dull pink. He hurried on.

"I figured you'd be tired. And it's only for tonight. If you're willing I think we ought to start tomorrow. This is the beginning of our rainy season, you know."

Marion stepped past him into the room and pushed wide the shutters so the golden morning flooded in. For a moment she was silent, her back turned to him.

"I don't see why you think I'd be tired. I've done nothing for a month but sit still on that boat . . . but of course it's all right." Her voice seemed to hover between scorn and tears, but her face was averted and Gene, by the door, could not tell.

"Then how about starting up-country tomorrow?"

"Of course. The sooner the better." She turned,

leaned against the window-sill, and faced him. Pulling off her wide-brimmed hat, she tossed it on the bed. Her dark hair clung moistly to her temples. She stroked it back with her forefingers, kept them rigidly there for an instant as if to steady her eyes.

"Gene?"

"Yes?"

"After all, we have a job to do up there, haven't we?"

"Why sure. . ."

"I mean—a job for me, too? Please, seriously." Her lips trembled. "If there's not, Gene, then I'm just a beggar and I'll die."

"Oh, for God's sake, Marion. . ." His hands lifted and he started toward her. An echo of Morin's words stabbed him and he halted clumsily. No, he couldn't touch her . . . not yet awhile. Something kept him rigid and impersonal. It was as if, illogically, the situation presented a problem of etiquette rather than emotion. Fellows, at home, were awkward in the presence of best girls. It was almost a tradition. He felt there must be exact and gallant things to say, if only he had not forgotten them. He elaborated lamely.

"Sure, of course. You'll be ever so much help to Jeff and me. You'll make everything different." It was difficult to see her face clearly as she stood there framed against the sky. He faltered, found a cigarette, and lighted it.

"Say, there's a German fellow I've got to see about handling our logs when they come down. It won't take me more'n an hour. I guess you'll be

glad of a chance to get your stuff unpacked and maybe wash up a little, huh?"

He broke a dull pause stutteringly.

"I . . . I tell you. We'll walk around town together all afternoon and see the sights. And shop. Might be a good idea if you bought some stuff, khaki and things, to make yourself some bush clothes when we get to Lolill. . . You used always to be sewing. . ."

* * *

They started inland in the middle of the morning, Bryce on foot and Marion in a pole chair carried by four men. There was no one to see them off. A departure for the hinterland has little glamour. It begins as it ends, merely a silent, trudging walk in the heat of tropic daytime.

A wide street intersects Molala and narrowing, stumbling a little, climbs a low hill behind the town. Turning, they looked for the last time down upon the white roofs and clustering trees of the port and out beyond over the shimmering mirror of Djombé River and the sea. The road dwindled to a footpath and in another mile the sea and the town were a vague memory. The jungle had closed in. There was a flavor of rot and growth and everlasting summer. The air was gray-green, there were no sounds but the rhythmic pat-pat of the porter's feet and the far-away harsh cries of birds in the remote tops of trees.

Bryce, helmet pushed back, a folded handkerchief under the band to keep the sweat from his eyes, walked ahead, hands in the pockets of his

khaki shorts. Perspiration streamed steadily down his face and dribbled itchingly over his bare knees. He kept his eyes on the ground. The steady trudge, trudge through the steaming day left no energy or will for thought. . . .

Far within his consciousness, hidden by the beat of blood in his cheeks and the hurt of his feet against the baking earth, was a sensation of gratitude at the postponement. . . For the time being . . . Under the circumstances. . . On safari it was too hot to finish sentences . . . or seek solutions . . . or to wonder.

Underwonder — underwonder — underwonder . . . like a drum, like a dry drum in tropic sunlight, all thoughts resolved to empty words and words to stupid sounds. And the sounds beat time. . .

Marion's belongings had been repacked in six new tin boxes, each carried on the head of a Lolill porter. Four tall natives brought up the rear with the pole chair. She submitted to three hours of it, but by mid-morning, feeling sore and giddy from the jerking, snapping motion of the seat, she stopped her men and got down. Grinning appreciatively, they hoisted the poles to easy balance on their skulls and trotted forward, the sweat glistening on their bare brown backs. She watched the play of their muscles and the twinkle of their thin legs until they vanished round a turn.

The sound of voices died away and loneliness, like a ghost, gathered huge and still around her. Now and then, somewhere in the green space, a leaf fluttered and there was a murmur like a living

breath high overhead where the branches interwove. Lips parted, eyes shadowed with wonder, she stood still and savored it. An increased brightness up above was the only hint of sky.

She pressed her palms against her breasts, her face upturned. Here, she knew, she had come to beauty. Nothing, forever and ever, could rob her of that. . .

After a moment, with a troubled, matter-of-fact little sigh, she stuffed wandering bits of hair up under her helmet and began to walk.

At two o'clock they crossed Djombé River. A dugout canoe carried them, the porters, and the boxes over, three by three. A chain of twisted vines fastened to trees on either bank spanned the stream, a distance of over thirty yards. A black ferryman stood forward in the dugout and dragged painfully hand over hand along the green, leaping cable, keeping the boat's nose upstream and sliding it slowly over.

Bryce, squatting in the bottom and clinging to the thwarts, explained.

"It's Djombé River, the same one that makes Molala a port. The damn thing twists around so we have to cross it five times on this trip. And there aren't any more ferries after this one, either." His mouth weakly half open, he looked apprehensively at the muddy water that rushed bubbling past the sides of the canoe. "If the rains haven't carried 'em away, there are some rotten native bridges, though."

The knotty black shoulders of the ferryman

strained and heaved, jerked and heaved again. He sang a half-uttered, grunting song. Slowly the canoe edged over, keeling crazily.

"Our bungalow," Gene added, "is just by Djombé River. There's a big sort of cascade behind the hill and when you listen you can hear it always . . . "

He fell silent. With wide eyes she gazed at the twirling, sliding water. The yellow river swept toward and past them with terrific force.

* * *

At the end of each day's march they stopped in native villages, huddled, secret little towns in forest clearings deep as wells and in the night as dark. Several families, with simple hospitality, would always vanish, leaving their beehive huts at the disposal of the travelers. . . Inasmuch as the diameter of a Gaboon native dwelling rarely exceeded eight feet, it was found convenient to set up his cot in one house and her's in another. . . By seven o'clock they had eaten their food and were asleep. . .

"Wait till we get to the bungalow. . ." Gene said.

And she: "When we get home."

They pressed on rapidly, starting early and halting late. There was real need for haste. Every afternoon dark clouds obscured the sun, the light darkened to dull green and the sky poured down. Tiny draggled figures in the shining streaks of rain, they plodded on. The bubbling tepid water, settling in the depression of the trail, fanned sloshing

back from the push of their ankles. The skin of hands and feet puckered as from long submergence in a bath.

A week passed. Bryce always kept ahead, only mistily aware that Marion did not use her chair and walked alone behind the caravan. One fact, concise and terrible, filled his imagining. . .

The great rains of Africa had come. Never had he guessed they could be so violent. One reckoned rainfall at home by inches in a year but here one measured by feet in a month. In each wet season water enough fell to cover the whole region to a depth of seven yards. . . That knowledge loomed in his mind with the hugeness of a fabled beast. And Djombé River, roaring toward the sea, was rising every hour. Four more times he knew it crossed their road. Then three times. Before this all personal things had insubstantial shape, seemed trivial. Later on . . . there would be time.

The ninth morning he heard the rumble of it once again. The path crossed a native farm where burnt felled trees, indeterminate and evil-shaped, sprawled in a black bed of mud and ashes. The sky was gray and all distances were diffused in a fine drizzle.

The river lay beyond a clump of trees. When he had come through them he saw with a catch of the breath that the vine bridge, ordinarily twenty feet above the water, sprang and jerked as if it were alive. At one point in its natural sag the flood rushed through it inches deep.

Undecided, he peered into the dripping branches

of the anchoring tree. Apparently the strands of liana were still firmly fixed.

When the file of porters came up he gestured vaguely and stood aside. The lead man, after one appraising look, picked his way up the root ladder, tested the bridge with one foot and stepped out upon it. The rest followed. Gene watched, his fingernails forcing into his clenched palms. Midway the water lapped their knees and the woven trough sagged dangerously. A few more paces and they had reached the other side, were already walking on, quickly dwindling in the mist.

The four hammock men came up. Marion, her soaking clothes clinging to her body, was with them. They huddled uncertainly beneath the dripping leaves. The natives, puzzled, eyed the bridge and considered the awkward thing they carried.

"Do you want it?" Marion asked. Her voice was quietly practical. "Because I certainly don't. I hardly use it at all."

Gene wiped his hand across his mouth and shook his head. She nodded at the men. It occurred to Bryce they had settled this matter long ago. The carriers hastily shouldered it, ran back down the path and with a joyous heave flung the thing into the grass.

He watched them stupidly. The lashing murmur of the river seemed to have dulled his senses. With a pang of fear and anger he realized Marion was already making her way over. The four men followed. He was the last to cross.

He was trembling and his face was red. Damn her, she didn't know the river like he did . . . it

was her fault anyway, coming out without having sense enough to think of the time of year. . .

A vision of her young body, her firm breasts, her slender hips, the shape of her thighs accentuated by the clinging cloth of her muddy dress, sprang into his mind and his veins throbbed. . . No damn use acting like a baby. He drew in his breath wheezingly. When they got to the bungalow . . .

His passion cooled. When they got to the bungalow, then he'd do anything for her. He sighed and flushed. What a stupid, embarrassed beginning they had made—that business in Molala, then the walk, and the rain, and the river.

He began to dogtrot, splashing and slipping through the muddy rivulets that drained across the path. He supposed he'd looked a coward, letting the others go over first. The next bridge was only an hour farther on. He resolved to get there first and show her. Show 'em all he wasn't afraid. Not of a river.

He soon overtook the end of the procession. Subsiding to a hurried walk, he pushed past.

Marion stopped and stood aside inquiringly.

"I'm going ahead and look at the river. See if it's safe," he explained. With each moment the load upon him seemed to lighten. The trip was nearly done and they had come through it safely. There was only the one more crossing and that would let him recoup his pride before her eyes; in a way, before his own. These exhausting, defeating days after all had been mere prologue.

The first porters, a wet, brown-gray little huddle

of figures, were squatting beside their loads in the high grass at one side. He strode on, head up, importantly. They rose silently and followed.

The crossing was the last except for the one just below Lolill. He had noticed it especially on the way down. At that point the river was narrow, deep, and incredibly swift. The straight banks were solid and on a level. A big tree had been felled so its prostrate length bridged the cut.

He whistled a few bars. Bound to be all right. At worst they'd only have the bother of chopping down another tree. It wasn't more than fifty feet. Easy to find a big one growing in the right position.

The sky had begun to thin and grow bluely luminous. The drizzle ceased. Everything was going to be all right. He'd show her.

The great black trunk was still there. Though the bank had been gouged out several feet and the surface of the water was only an inch or two under the log, it was still perfectly sound. When the carriers arrived he motioned them cheerfully to wait.

Marion joined him.

"This is the last but one," he told her loudly, "and the other doesn't count." He scrambled to the log, stopped, and turned his head. "Remember what the judge told you—about rivers and men? Don't let him kid you. Watch this!"

Arms out, he began to run along the tree. Marion smiled wanly. A recollection came out of the years of a fat little boy on a picket fence—a high fence along a dusty summer lane. "Watch this!"

She screamed. A huge floating log appeared

above the swirling surface and bore ravenously toward the bridge.

There was a terrific concussion when it struck, a fearful smashing and rending. The huge trunk writhed upward, vanished. Gene had shot into the air, splashed down and disappeared.

Marion groped for support, and her fingers found the coarse wetness of tree bark. The carriers had thrown down their loads and were running through the high grass along the bank. Queer, bird-like little notes of fright came back from them. In a moment they were gone. She moved to follow them, staggered weakly, and sat down.

She puckered her dry eyelids with an effort of memory. . . Gene had run across the log. Halfway she had seen him hesitate, grow still with horror. In that instant a massive, derelict log had come like a battering ram around the bend and plunged against the bridge. There was not room for it to carry safely under. The impact had catapulted Gene into mid-torrent. The log, forced from its resting place on the far bank had twisted, splashed, and swept magnificently away. There had been no possibility of hope. No one could live in Djombé River in the time of rains. . . So Gene was dead. She was alone.

This was the end. Her eyes slowly dimmed with tears. The great adventure, then, had come to this. The bright dreams of the lonely years, the shining world, a man who wanted her, a man to help, to love . . . all these swept away in the gray, empty jungle rain by a river . . . by Djombé River. Long, slow moments passed.

A wood pigeon cooed faintly in a treetop. The silence, the desolate loveliness of the woods pressed down upon her, an irony of immortality and peace.

She said aloud: "Djombé River." What a quality of awe and everlastingness was there. . . She rose to her feet, went to the bank and dropped upon her knees, letting her hands dangle in the water. How cool, how living was its touch. It tugged lightly at her fingertips and she drew them back, afraid. She gazed wonderingly up the dark cavern of the overhanging trees from which the river came . . . perhaps, farther on, farther on . . .

Farther on among the years there might still be a place or a task that wanted her . . .

She faced the gathering certainty of days. Gene hadn't. Not at all. He'd never touched her, never kissed her. . . He was just . . . being kind. Poor Gene. Sobs flooded her throat, tears her eyes and she crumpled down, a lonely, weeping little figure in the high wet grass by the river. The wood pigeon cooed again. The raindrops pattered in a stir of wind.

* * *

An hour later the carriers reappeared. A mile downstream the trunk had foundered amid overhanging bushes and was held fast. But there was no trace of the drowned man. They were still whispering excitedly, reënacting the accident with wide gestures. They stopped at sight of Marion.

The headman, a tall, middle-aged negro in ragged shorts, touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Mammy. We make bush house here for now.

Tomorrow we cut tree and go for Lolill. Old massa he wait for there. We no find young massa. He done finish. . . Papa Djombé. . . Black boy say they be . . . they be sorry." His lined brown face puckered with sympathy. "We be your boy now, Mammy. We go for Lolill?"

She looked up at him, slowly nodded.

II

Totton sat on the porch, his back against a post, his legs sprawled easily down the steps. The afternoon was drowsily warm. He watched a black and golden butterfly settling and darting above the grass and considered lazily. Should he call Aloki to get his bath ready or would he first stroll down the hill and have a look at the bridge? With a comfortable sigh he got up, stretched, and with hands in pockets wandered down the path. Bryce had been away nearly a month and might arrive at any time. Just to be sure, he'd look at the bridge once more.

After the still gloom of the forest the glare was blinding above the open river. Shading his eyes with his hand, he peered up into the branches, examining the vine fastenings. All was secure. He climbed to the bridge and walked halfway across. Midway he stopped and leaned against the downstream slope. The hot sun upon his back and the swirl of the bright running water gave him a sense of basking relaxation. He half closed his eyes.

It had been a long wait—thirty years of the tropics, Bolivia, Siam, the Gaboon. Dreary, lonely

enough it had always been to look forward to, but —he breathed deep of the hot, fragrant air—not bad at all to look back on. Be just like the thanklessness of humans if next year in Paris or New York or Vienna or wherever he was, he'd have a twinge of homesickness. He chuckled. He'd take a chance on that. . . Wonder how the concession would get on without him? He half opened his eyes and cast them appraisingly on the nearby trunks. First thing to do when Gene's girl showed up was to give her a few lessons in the lumber business. Heaven help the company with fat little Gene as foreman. He had wondered several times during the past month whether his offer had not been impetuous. Come down to it, Gene was young and not particularly capable. Possibly a wife would brace him. Something should. He smiled to himself. Curious that every time he thought of Gene he had an irresistible desire to yawn.

He stood erect and listened attentively. Voices. Talk of the devil! With long steps that set the bridge springing he crossed to the far side and walked a few quick paces along the trail. The caravan rounded a turn and he halted abruptly.

Marion was ahead. Her white dress, always inappropriate and fragile, was caked about the hem with mud and streaked with dirt and grass stains. Her stockings were torn, muddy, her dark hair appeared in confused masses from beneath her wilted helmet.

She stopped at sight of him and her dark blue eyes found his. The expression in them sent a sudden lump into his throat and made him sick with

surmise. Timorous, weary, tear-dimmed, they yet held level. Her mouth trembled.

"Mr. Totton?"

Jeff nodded.

"Gene was drowned when we crossed the river two days ago. A . . . a floating log struck the bridge and carried it away. We came on here because I didn't know what else to do." She hesitated. "I will go away soon. I . . . I'm sorry."

When he found his voice it came with a brusque loudness that startled him. The muscles of his eyes and jaws seemed to drag from the force of the pity that welled in him. His ragged helmet still rested ridiculously on the back of his head. He had forgotten to take it off.

"Oh, good Lord, don't talk about that." He took both her hands impulsively. "My poor, poor child!"

In that touch an instant sympathy passed between them. His workman's brown hands enclosed hers completely. A wave of relief swept over her. It was almost as if she had come home. His lean, bronzed face, his kind gray eyes . . . after the fearful days of no one it was comforting to find he was like this.

He signaled that the carriers were to continue and stood aside with her to let them pass. They watched silently while the negroes crossed the hammock bridge and disappeared.

"Gene told me," she said in a low voice, "that the last bridge didn't count."

She walked forward resolutely, then stopped, shuddering, and covered her face with her hands.

Jeff understood. With perfect naturalness he picked her up in his arms. She clung to him. Midway of the bridge he paused to balance himself.

"Don't be afraid, Ma'am," he said. She shook her head. He held her tighter to him and kept on.

* * *

He explained the arrangements of the bungalow in a commonplace, slightly hurried tone—the verandah, the big rough-boarded living room to the left of the entrance door and the two bedrooms, his own and Gene's, to the right.

"We don't," he indicated, "run the partitions all the way up to the roof. Gets a better circulation of air the way it is. You won't find it much to look at, but it's comfortable." He opened his mouth to boast of the fine new bungalow he had planned to build for them, thought better of it and stopped.

He silently helped her to arrange her boxes in Gene's room and sent Aloki and the cook to heat water for a bath.

In a few minutes he left her at her door. She gave him her hand and looked at him. "I can't ever begin to tell you how grateful I am, Mr. Totton," she said.

He cleared his throat. "Anything at all I can do . . . I guess I can't tell you how sorry I am."

* * *

Totton walked moodily down the yard. At the hedge he tore off a red hibiscus flower and crushed it tremblingly between his fingers. His mind was

in a turmoil. Seeking to order his emotions, he strove to think of the initial tragedy—of Gene, of his cheerful, planless days so violently and so senselessly ended. But try as he would he could not dwell on that. The tragedy of death seemed incidental, ended utterly in contrast with the continuing tragedy of the girl. He mouthed soundless, reverent profanities. . . To escape at last from the commonplace years and come to Africa to join her lover—then to see him die before her eyes . . . Lord, what a filthy trick!

With a vague, clumsy gesture he wiped the sweat from his forehead. The blood seemed to pound in his temples. A vision of her crossed his mind, of the pale drawn face against his coarse shirt, the relaxed young body in his arms as he carried her over Djombé River bridge. . . Why, she was a beauty. . .

He kicked through a clump of grass and gazed with earnest detachment at the gathering clouds in the early sunset sky.

"Yes, now what?" he asked half aloud. He shook his head seriously, helplessly, decided on postponement. With a physical shock he observed his ragged trousers.

* * *

Jeff, ill at ease in a white suit that had mysteriously shrunken during several years' retirement, stood waiting at the edge of the verandah. He heard light steps behind him, but in an access of acute embarrassment did not turn. Marion, not realizing

he was aware of her, studied him in silence for a moment.

Totton was a type of man she had never before known. His watchful gray eyes, the breadth of his shoulders, the easy poise of his long body gave him a look of calm and purpose. He seemed effortlessly to dominate the silence, the twilight, the whispering desolation all about them.

She stepped beside him. "This is an awfully nice bungalow," she offered in a low voice.

He smiled down at her. "It has a roof and four walls and it keeps the weather out. You can say that much for it."

She shook her head. "No, really. . ." She looked out over the rolling meadowland of dark treetops under them. "This is the most beautiful country, you know, that I have ever seen."

He looked at her wonderingly.

"It makes me feel," she went on softly, "that I have come back to the beginning. It seems . . . I don't know just what to say. It seems as if it were waiting. . . That perhaps when the waiting was over, the beauty would end. . . Is that a very silly thing to say, Mr. Totton?"

"Waiting?" Jeff echoed. "It's a great place for waiting, all right. I've been doing that as long as I can remember." He examined her admiringly. Except for a look of weariness about the corners of her mouth and eyes there was little trace of the bedraggled waif of the afternoon. She wore a sleeveless white linen dress. She stood erect, courageous, young. Her lips were slightly parted, tasting the twilight air.

"I'd like to say, Ma'am," said Totton earnestly, "that I certainly do admire your nerve. You show more courage than I would if I'd been through what you have. . ." He hesitated, fumbled uneasily with his unfamiliar necktie and looked away from her. "I'll tell you why I mentioned it. . . It crossed my mind that maybe you were keeping your end up on account of me. That you and I not being acquainted very well maybe put you on your good behavior. Because don't." He put his hand on her shoulder, suddenly conscious, lowered it again. "I knew Gene pretty well, you know. In my way about as well, I imagine, as you did in yours. So, I mean to say, if you want to talk about him . . . or anything . . . go ahead."

She shook her head. "No, it isn't that. But thank you anyway. You are awfully kind."

He shifted impatiently. "No use saying that."

Aloki, behind them, announced dinner.

* * *

In a sort of hushed casualness they talked of food, of the difficulties of a jungle garden, of the aggravation of all cooks, of the obvious excellence of Aloki, of a boy Totton had had in Bolivia and lost from an overturned canoe on a tributary of the Rio Madre. (The inappropriateness of this tale upset and silenced him.) But for the most part they said nothing. Marion's eyes seemed turned in upon herself. Her fingers ran incessant, nervous little courses among the things in front of her. Her manner, it seemed to Jeff, was thoughtful rather than

sad. As if, he sagely guessed, the future occupied her to the exclusion of the past.

He was content to look at her. There was no harm in that, he argued. A man would have to be blind or senile not to. He worried whether she was really as exquisite, her skin as smooth, her eyes so deeply blue, her mouth as tender as they seemed to him.

Aloki cleared away the things, made a bundle of the wrinkled cotton tablecloth and ducked out under the hanging net for the last time. The silence that followed his going was oppressive. Except for the occasional faint angry rattle of termites in a mud nest somewhere in the roof thatch, the eternal roar of distant Djombé falls, and the sawing of cicadas in the outer dark, the quiet was absolute.

They listened to the night. Marion's elbows were on the table and her cheeks leaned upon her palms. She glanced thankfully toward Totton. The line of his jaw, the seams in his sun-darkened face, his straight mouth made a rigid pattern which she found consoling. The mood of the woods was so intangible, amorphous.

"Mr. Totton," she said at last in a low voice. "If you don't mind I'd like to talk to you. I owe you an explanation."

"You don't owe me anything, Ma'am."

She shook her head. "Yes, I do. I mean an explanation of myself. . ." She hesitated, then went on steadily, her eyes on the table. She had torn a splinter from the rough board top and drew tiny shapes with it. "You must think I'm a queer

sort of widow. I must seem terribly hard. About Gene. Not to seem more sorry." She considered. "Of course I am sorry. It was a fearful, a ghastly thing." Her mouth puckered but quickly became firm again. "But it was a way out. He didn't want me, Mr. Totton."

Jeff made a clucking sound in his throat.

"No. I mean it very seriously. He was only being sorry for me. I didn't of course realize or I should never have come." She looked up pleadingly. "You can't realize how tired I am of people being sorry for me." Her eyes filled suddenly with tears and she brushed them peevishly away. "Really! You see, my mother died when I was a baby so I was 'poor child' to everyone for as long as I remember. Then when my father became ill I took care of him. So I was 'poor Marion' then. . . I can't tell you how kind everyone has been to me. How they've pitied me. . . Or how I've wished they wouldn't. I suppose you think that's childish and ungrateful?"

"No-o."

"It is but I can't help it . . . When Gene came back from college I thought it wasn't the same. Honestly, I don't think it was. At least I like to think he loved me for a little while. But he got over it out here and I was so foolish I didn't realize that of course he would. I'm sure, though, he pitied me! I knew it was that and only that the minute I got off the boat. But I was too cowardly to let myself know it. I simply—I simply didn't know what else to do."

Jeff cleared his throat. "I wouldn't be too sure of that. You can't know. . ."

"Yes, I can." She nodded vehemently. "Of course I can. He didn't want me. Not for anything. He never even touched me, Mr. Totton, do you see? No man can know how bitter that is for a woman. How it destroys all one's childish vanity. I felt so horribly lost. . . Do you understand? You see, I wanted him, or some one . . . so much. To look forward to life for a long, long time. . . This whole thing, Africa and getting away and a place for me at last. Oh, I was so hopeful." She steadied her voice and looked at him. "You are awfully good to listen to me go on like this, Mr. Totton."

"Why, no indeed. I don't see why we can't be friends."

"Thank you." Her glance wavered, left his face, roamed desperately. The night wind shifted, rustled like approaching ghostly voices through the trees. It brought the sound of Djombé River nearer. She listened and her face drooped forward on her arms. "I don't know why the dickens, though, it couldn't have taken me instead!"

The muscles of his throat were tight and his lips dry. So long, so long to have been away from all important, human things! He felt strangely, in that instant, younger than she. He leaned across the table and tried to touch her hair. It was an insistent need for him, far more than simple gentleness. As if he must reach quickly back across the empty years. His fingers fell just short, and he rose and came around the table to her. He cupped her

shoulders in his hands and steadied her. A kind of strength flowed up to him. With an effort he controlled his breathing. He said nothing for a long moment, then bent down.

"We've got plenty of time ahead of us, you know," he said. "You've had a long day. Why don't you turn in now and we'll . . . we'll see about things tomorrow? What do you say?" Her head nodded and he half lifted her to her feet and turned her to him. Her face fell back and she staggered a little. He put his arm about her waist to steady her. Suddenly he strained her to him and kissed her mouth. Her lips seemed lightly to answer his.

He stepped back, his face hot with confusion. Without a word he lifted the edge of the net for her to pass under. They walked the length of the porch and turned in the door. At the entrance of her room, dimly visible in the light of a smoking lantern that hung from the ceiling, he spoke again, by an immense effort of will keeping his voice under control.

"Good night. I guess Aloki has fixed your lamp and everything. If you want anything just say so. I'll be right in here. Good night."

"Good night."

* * *

An hour later Jeff lay on his bed wide awake, staring at the feebly lighted roof. His lamp and hers in the next room had been left part on and the vague rays mingled above the partition. It had begun to rain outside, a booming, lashing tropic

rain that made the house creak and faintly stir, seem doubly isolated in the black and streaming vastness of the woods. But the thatch was sound and the smoky lamps burned steadily.

He turned twitchingly, put out one hand till his fingertips rested lightly on the wall. The bed in which she slept, the big reed bed he had built in the past month as a surprise for the bride and groom, stood immediately next his with only the wall between. He could hear her. She was sobbing, hopeless, buried sobs that tore him like rawhide whips.

"Poor child, poor child," his lips formed over and over again. How beautiful she was!

He tensed out his long legs strongly and pressed his calloused palms hard down upon his eyelids. The scent of her breath, the touch of her moist mouth, the pulse of her body against his consumed him like fire. And he pitied her. His eyes felt dry with aching sorrow for her. The two emotions seemed to touch and intermingle.

"My God . . . my God!" he whispered.

A wistful cry, muffled and made almost inaudible by her pillow, came through the wall. With overwhelming resolve, he swung his feet to the floor, found his slippers and put on a ragged bathrobe. He opened his own door and walked shakily to hers. With hand lifted to knock he hesitated. He was trembling violently. What was he going to say, do? In a moment he nodded decisively and tapped.

The sounds abruptly ceased. At last a voice answered, "Yes?"

"Can I come in for a minute?"

Again a pause and again a "Yes." He turned the knob and entered. She sat diagonally on her bed, her bare shoulders propped against the wall. Her hair, shadowy and ill-defined in the half-light, hung about her shoulders. Her lips were parted and her eyes wide.

He paused irresolutely half-way of the room. "I beg your pardon coming in like this. But I couldn't sleep, hearing you. . . I guessed maybe you were worrying about what was going to happen? What you were going to do, I mean. And I thought of something. I thought of it before, but I'm such a damn fool I . . . I forgot to mention it."

He came to the edge of the bed, sat upon it, and took her hand uncertainly in his.

"I thought of something," he repeated heavily, "and I wanted, I had to know what you'd think." She gave him no help and he continued. "I wanted to say that if you didn't want to, you didn't have to go away from here. That was it. Just feel it's your place as much as mine. You have right to it, you know, because of Gene . . . and everything. Don't be in a hurry, that's all I mean."

"I . . . "

His grip tightened on her hand and he lowered his face ashamedly. "Don't say 'thank you.' " His voice thickened pleadingly. "Good God, you can't realize what it would mean to me if you'd stay awhile. You don't know how damned lonesome it gets. I've just dry-rotted my life away. Maybe, maybe I shouldn't say this. So soon after Gene . . . " He broke off. That somehow did not mat-

ter. Even the ghost of him was gone. All things had burned away but the sense of the waste years, their loneliness, and his desire.

Her mouth grew curiously gentle, but a long minute passed before she spoke.

"You mean you want me to? For my own sake?" She put out her other hand and covered his.

"Yes . . . yes. For mine."

The lashing rain outside seemed to force them together. It was as if they were lost. She tried to move nearer him, came up kneeling. Her mouth was close to his. "You're not just being kind? Sure? Sure?"

"No. Lord, no."

She put her arms about his neck. "If you're really sure."

She relaxed against him and his mouth found hers. His eyes filled boyishly with tears and he held her to him. His hand, trembling, moved along her back.

"I am so glad," she whispered.

At midnight the rain ceased as quickly as it had come and a chill wind renewed the sound of Djombé falls. Once she moved uneasily and, still sleeping, his arm went over her.

He awoke from long habit and listened the next instant to the distant blast upon Aloki's horn. She did not stir. Her head, the dark hair disarrayed about it, lay pillowed on her arms. She slept serenely, curled up like a child. Cautiously, so as not to wake her, he leaned and kissed her side.

Quietly he arose and went to his own room.

An hour after daybreak she came to the verandah where he sat waiting on the steps. They pressed each other's hands and exchanged shy good mornings.

Aloki brought the long delayed breakfast, his brown, blank face a mask of restrained but perfect comprehension.

"This food isn't much good," Jeff said. "Suppose you take that job over right now. You might try your hand at a garden. I've got a drawerful of seeds inside if they haven't all sprouted."

"Grand."

They smiled at each other.

Jeff cleared his throat self-consciously. "I've got another idea."

"What?"

"Want to get married?"

"If you do."

He leaned across the table and took her hands. "I sure do. . . That is . . . that is. Do you? It seems a poor sort of bargain for you . . . a dead old timber-trimmer like me. . . But it might be better, seeing . . . "

"I told you last night," she said earnestly. "If you want me. I . . . I'm looking for a job!"

"I'm no boy, you know."

"Oh, there's lots of time ahead. In a way we're both just beginning, aren't we?"

He got up. "Fine then. There's a German missionary fellow about sixty miles to the northeast. We could make it in three days, easy. . . But I guess you're pretty tired?"

"Not at all."

He looked at her appraisingly. "You're a good sport, all right . . . I tell you. I figure the sooner we get any traveling done the better. The rains are coming stronger all the time and walking's getting hard."

"Do we cross the river?"

He shook his head. "No. Not on that road It lies the other way." He held out his hands for her to rise. "It's pretty going through the woods."

"I'm sure it is."

* * *

Herr Günter, the Lutheran pastor of an ailing flock of natives on a hilltop, proved a mixture of almost frenzied hospitality—they were the first visitors, he explained over and over again, he had had in six months—and mystified disapproval. But his duty lay clear and in a manner suggestive of awful menace he performed the service.

Günter's wine was excellent and his household spotless, but disregarding his nearly tearful protests, they departed the next morning.

The return journey was not pleasant. They had had dry weather outward, but now the trail had turned to a slide of greasy mud. The afternoon rains were accompanied by chill winds that set the branches crying. . . Besides, with a growing sense of exasperation, it came to Jeff that the steady rhythm of safari was a kind of exercise very different from the intermittent sort to which he was accustomed. His feet had blistered so he limped. He realized Marion slowed her pace to his. Half amusedly, half with dull anger he wondered how

he had forgotten there were twenty-seven years between them. Youth was insatiable.

They reached the bungalow in late afternoon. Jeff ate his dinner in sleepy silence. Occasionally he would raise his eyes and each time met hers.

Once, gaily, she remarked, "Wonder if you know, husband, that you are the handsomest man I've ever seen?"

He grinned half-heartedly and blushed. "Oh, for God's sake."

When they had finished she asked him if he didn't smoke.

"Haven't for ten years."

She smiled. "Funny, isn't it, how little we really know about each other? It ought to make life interesting."

"I guess it ought." He rose, stretched himself creakingly, came about the table and kissed her hair. "I don't know what your plans are, but I'm going to sleep."

She put her arm around his neck. "Not sorry, are you?"

He straightened up and her hands lowered to her lap. "Not a bit sorry. Just sleepy. Tell Aloki to see if he can't scare up some eggs for tomorrow morning. Good night."

"Good night, Jeff. I love you. Sometime when you've got more than one eye open I'll tell you how grateful I am. Really, this time."

He smirked drowsily. "You'll get over that."

He went to his own room.

She heard his door shut. For an hour she sat still. Occasionally she smiled, once she wept a lit-

tle. And for a long, long time she simply listened. In the sibilant dark around her, in the eternal roar of the falls beyond the hill it seemed there was some word for her. But what it was she could not understand.

* * *

Jeff sat on the steps. He chewed a blade of citronella and gazed with admiration at the operations of a family of wasps beneath the thatch.

Marion in her room was unpacking her trunks and arranging things. A dozen times it occurred to him that an immense accumulation of work waited to be done, but the yellow brightness of the afternoon dissuaded him. He heard her moving about inside—his wife—and was filled with placid enjoyment. She certainly was better company than Gene. He blushed.

"Jeff!" she called.

"What?"

She came out on the porch with a leather sack in her arms.

"Had you forgotten or were you just being polite? This is the mail I brought from Molala." She sat down beside him and began to try to unbuckle the strap.

He reached out. "Let's see it. I know how to work that thing."

He opened the bag expertly and shook the contents on the floor. There were half a dozen letters, several rolled magazines and a bulky package. He picked it up curiously and weighed it. "What the deuce is this? It's heavy enough."

She leaned over his shoulder to read the label. "'American Express Company, Paris.' What on earth?"

Totton broke the cords with a jerk and shook the contents out between them. There was a cascade of color. Pamphlets, booklets, timetables, tour schedules, all brightly lithographed, piled in the sun.

Jeff snapped his fingers. "Gosh, I'd forgot all about it. I wrote five months or more ago for this stuff."

Her hands were busy among the papers. "What a grand idea! All my life this has been my favorite reading. 'Baden-Baden, Paris in Five Days, Côte d'Azur,'" she read aloud. "What fun! . . What's the matter?"

His face had suddenly gone gray. He got up stiffly, averting his face from her.

"What is it?" she insisted. "Have I said anything?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, I tell you. You haven't said anything."

She scrambled to her feet and tried to put her arms around him. He shook her off angrily. "Nothing, I tell you. I . . . I just thought, there's a gang working today I've got to see. I'll be back around . . . around dinner sure."

He ran down the steps, strode, without turning his head, along the yard path and vanished beyond the hedge.

Marion stood watching him, wonderingly. Her glance wandered back to the pile of folders about her feet. After a moment—a still and troubled

moment—she leaned over and picked them up. Slowly she untangled the wrapping cord and retied the bundle.

* * *

The sun climbed to zenith. Week after week the thunder rumbled and for uninterrupted days there was nothing but the gurgle of the rain. Green slime grew upon boots. Lamps set burning continuously in the clothes presses were ineffectual against the mold. A cloud of driving mist hung forever above the forest. Down the hill behind the cookshed one might see the shabby huts of Lolill town, the smoke spiraling through the soggy thatch. The rough bamboo doors were always up and no one moved abroad. Africa was waiting for the terror of the year to pass.

The sun, so rarely seen, veered northward up toward the far-away desert. The rains dwindled and at last the jungle steamed in yellow glare. At night one heard again the far-away hoarse shouting of the apes. The vivid dome of sky was cloudless and a new quality of silence settled down.

Imprisoned by the rains, they had talked endlessly. And at length they had exhausted talk and fallen silent. The present, the drowsy, empty, waiting present supplied few incidents, few materials for thought. There were no people to gossip of, few books, no gaieties.

Their pasts, they found, touched nowhere. His was concerned with places, hers with people the other had not known. For weeks, intermittently, she tried to draw him out and at long last realized

that it was not taciturnity that slowed his tongue, but the mere eventlessness of his life. Thirty years of cutting timber in the bush. That was all. . .

This grandeur of the elemental woods, this glory of which she had dreamed so long—this, then, was a prison too. At home as a child she had gone a hundred times to the unpainted little railway station at the edge of town and stood looking down the shining, tapering tracks that led away. . . Now she stood upon the hammock bridge and watched the glistening flow of Djombé River. That was the only difference.

These moods passed. The future existed. They, would, of course, not wait indefinitely.

* * *

Jeff explained one night that he was going away for two weeks. The river had sufficiently subsided and the time had come to move the year's logs down to the coast for sale.

"There's a Hamburg buyer coming up the river this year as far as a launch will bring him and he says"—Totton tapped a letter brought by runner that afternoon—"he'll give me the same price per ton they pay in Molala. I'll get 'em down and come back as soon as I've turned them over to him. He's setting up a factory and I'll bring back some supplies. Figure out what you need."

He studied her face as he spoke. "Feeling all right?"

"Certainly. Why?"

He patted her hand. "Nothing, I only thought.

He rode them in midstream.

You'll take care of yourself while I'm gone? Never forget your quinine or anything."

She came to him and sat on his lap. With their faces close together they studied each other's eyes for a long minute.

"You're so sweet to me, Jeff," she said. "You'll come home soon, won't you?"

"Sure thing." His arm went round her and he drew her to him. "I figure," he explained, "I'll start day after tomorrow. But there's nothing much to do till then. Let's just play around, huh?"

"We can go," she suggested, "to the pool above the falls."

"That'll be great . . . I guess I'm not much at saying things. But I suppose you know what you mean to me?"

* * *

Totton's method of moving logs was unique in the Gaboon. It was the occasion of the year for him. Other woodsmen sent the timbers down in clumsy, bumping rafts. He rode them in midstream.

More laborers were available than at any other time for there was a spirit of holiday that clouded for them the realization that the work was hard. Two of the concession gangs struggled through the underbrush along the river, broke up the caches of squared logs and dragged them down the banks till the current caught and swirled them away. Those that drifted among the weeds and were entangled were repeatedly set free and put upon their way again. Forty miles beyond the limits of the concession there was a long cascade and then

a wide, quiet pool. On the torturous road of river below the pool Jeff took direct command.

He had learned the craft of riding logs in boyhood years ago on the snow-swollen springs of Michigan. A secret but intense pride in the gift, the immense stimulation of it, had, though he realized it only dimly, influenced his life more than any other factor. In the tropics it had been peculiarly rewarding. Perhaps because no others knew the trick of it.

The chances of the current berthed the first logs among the rushy shallows at the sides of the pool. At daybreak he began. He wore spike-soled shoes, khaki trousers and a ragged, short-sleeved shirt. The strap of his helmet was caught beneath his under lip. With marvelous precision he wielded a long pronged pole with a hinged thumb of steel.

With the delight of a dancer he ran out upon the lunging, rolling timbers, straightening, directing, disentangling them. Once, with a gladiatorial gesture that made the watching natives shriek with admiration, he speared a small crocodile and flung it on high ground. New pieces continually pounded down the falls. He received them, shepherded them and two days later when the count tallied, started them by twos and threes upon the final course. Parties of laborers followed. But they worked ashore and in the shallows. On the shining, majestic flood he rode alone as master.

The vivid hours and days of dominance gave him complete peace. He had, he realized, grown stale and aged during the inactive months of rains.

Lord, he'd forgotten how good he was! He vaulted lightly from a rolling log, found foothold on another, set it turning with a running motion of his feet and freed it from temporary bondage in shoal mud. He'd forgotten Djombé River! What sweep, what grandeur, what self-sufficiency it had. . . It came to him that in some way, in some insubstantial way it had been contemptible of Gene to let Djombé get him. It had been too big for Gene. But for him it was just right. They understood each other. They were partners. They were bound for the sea together. He'd nearly forgotten the old contract they had made. He smiled.

Down to the sea! How the yellow river swam and bubbled between the high walls of jungle green. How superb was the feel of the pounding sun on his back. Down to the sea!

He rode a giant log, head up, lips parted gaily. An occasional slight shift of foothold, a casual tilt of the pole held crosswise of his breast sufficed to steady him. All about him, like a school of colossal porpoises, floated black lengths of timbers, bumping, rolling, sucking, all moving easily downward. And he—he, Jeff Totton, only fifty-one years old—was lord of it all!

In a shoal of elephant grass near one bank some logs were entangled. A dozen tall native men, waist-deep in water, their wet brown bodies gleaming in the sunlight, were struggling to set them right. Their high, soft-noted cries of direction echoed across the water to him. Totton spiked a nearby log, drew it lightly toward him, stepped off upon

it, repeated the process twice and jumped into the shallows.

The difficulty was obvious to him. With a friendly gesture he brushed aside the laborers and thrust his pole at the point where one log slightly overlapped another. One slight heave, he knew, and they would be quiet upon their courses again. The pole bent and he grunted with exertion. Angrily he thrust and forced again. His hands slipped, he stumbled forward and fell, striking his chin on the coarse bark and splashing full-length in the muddy water. A half-dozen men solicitously helped him to his feet. His head swam drunkenly and they half carried him ashore, where he sat heavily on the hot ground. At a nod from him they returned to work. A young negro took the spiked pole, twisted it as he had and the timbers floated free. Some one brought the stick and laid it beside him. They continued on their way, in a moment were gone in the waving reeds.

Totton took off his helmet and with shaking hands wiped the sweat and water from his hair. He felt his stubbled chin. It was slightly cut and damnably sensitive. And his head felt heavy. There was no hurry, he told himself. He stared moodily across the glaring sheen of water to the high green barrier of trees on the far bank.

He spoke, half aloud. "Jeff, you're getting old."

He closed his eyes. The exhaustion of the week past seemed suddenly to overwhelm him. His fingers were tremulous, his heart was pounding too rapidly. The rivulets of sweat that oozed and ran upon his wet body made him irritable.

He pondered earnestly whether the young black had succeeded with the pole where he had failed because of their difference in years. At fifty-one perhaps a man did grow clumsy. He remembered he had read somewhere that after fifty the most notable change was that recovery of any sort was slower. Possibly. It was ridiculous to be so knocked out by a little tap on the chin. It wouldn't do to wait forever. . .

He opened his eyes. There, smoothly, agelessly and forever, ran the river, the immortal, vagrant, majestic soul of the vast woods, Djombé River that he'd planned so long to follow away from waiting . . . away from the long, long waste of years. . . As he watched, for the first time its inscrutable grandeur weighed on him.

His lips hardened. No damn use in being childish about it. Might as well face it clearly. That dream was out. Marion had changed all that. There wasn't enough money for two and that was that. If they quit, the savings would last them no more than eight or nine years. Then there would be nothing ahead. There weren't any jobs for a tropical timberman outside of the tropics, certainly not for a man of fifty-one.

There was a long hiatus in his thoughts and then, like the turning of regular wheels, he began again.

He wondered very carefully if another might chance it. No . . . he thought not. Starting all over again wasn't the game for anything but youth. It simply wasn't any way possible. No. . .

Poor Marion. What a cruel trap it had been for

her. But at least, he smiled sourly, she'd outlast him. She'd get away sometime. Get away on his money. As a widow. There was enough for one.

"For one." The words spoke themselves aloud. He moistened his lips, looked furtively over his shoulder to see if anyone was by to overhear. Sun-drowsed desolation only. He pressed his palms to his eyes till bright spots swam in the dark. What a queer chance stroke it would be if she should die first. Malaria, the river, there were a thousand chances. . .

He could kill her.

A gasping, startled grunt forced out of him. He felt a sudden nauseated terror. He scrambled hastily to his feet and grabbing up his stick began to run, breasting the cutting grass, leaping over obstacles, splashing furiously through water till he streamed and panted in the sun. A vision of her soft mouth, her lonely eyes swam before him, and his heart ached with love for her. "Oh, my God. . ." He loved her. He loved her. It must be that he was going mad. . .

* * *

For a day Marion had enjoyed being alone. She deliberately relaxed, strove with fair success to banish all reflection, all troubling, whispering, confusing doubts . . . Then gradually the silence seemed to press upon her like an accumulating weight. She slapped shut the covers of a book—a poor and futile novel read through for the third time—and got up from her chair.

Aimlessly she began to walk about the house.

The shutters were up and the cool gloom inside, streaked with mote-filled lines of light, held a slight quality of mystery. Even in that drab and too-familiar place one might still make discoveries. She smiled whimsically to herself. At least the dull old house at home had had an attic. How deceiving dreams were. To come to Africa, to the continent of magic and of danger, and mind because it didn't have an attic. Merely silence . . . silence and such a brooding loneliness it nearly drove one mad.

"Don't," she whispered aloud, "be an ungrateful little beast."

She examined the ragged row of books on a shelf above her husband's bed, wondering if she could recite the titles and authors accurately from left to right. She thought so. A narrow, short little volume nearly hidden between two stout treatises caught her eye and she took it out.

She read the inked inscription on the board cover. "Personal Accounts of Geoffery Totton." After a moment's hesitation she took it to the verandah to study it. Surely Jeff wouldn't mind.

For a time the figures were incomprehensible. The order was chronological only. The first record, in ink already turning brown, was of a deposit of $109 in a New York saving's bank eleven years before. Another deposit followed, another and then the pages were thickened by innumerable little printed slips of paper pasted carefully in and interlarded with other inked insertions. One clipping seemed to be from a life insurance circular and dealt with expectation of life reckoned on from the years of middle age. Leafing through she found a

number of tables, on the heavily sized paper of tourist circulars, of minimum hotel rates and railroad passenger fares in Europe and America. Near the end were three pages packed with an incomprehensible medley of figures—but from them emerged a clear total and intention.

Marion, her eyes misting, examined them, then softly closed the book.

She understood. This, then, was the record of Jeff's life and the statement of his hope. He had saved and put away a little over $14,000. And by his reckonings, his clippings, his childish, remote investigation of the world outside, the world he knew so little of, he had assured himself this money would suffice. For him and for the time he visioned might remain to him.

The last note in the book bore a date three days before that humid afternoon when he had carried her in his arms across the hammock bridge. To judge by the dust he had not touched it since. She had destroyed all that for him. She and Gene. And Djombé River.

That shabby, labored little book held hope for one but never in the world for two. For whichever one chance might select. For him or her. For one . . . for one. She covered her face with her hands and tried to think.

The roar of the river falls behind the hill seemed to grow in volume till it filled the afternoon, to wash and stir and whisper in her mind.

Getting up, she found her helmet and walked slowly down the path, through the murmurous high woods and out upon the swinging bridge. She leant

against the latticed slope and fixed her half-closed eyes on the shining stream.

Very softly she asked aloud: "Djombé River?" The weird, live whispering went on.

* * *

The long months of drought were a trying time. The days that followed Jeff's return had been violent with a quality of passion they did not dare to understand. They had confronted one another white and timorous and sprung to refuge in a close embrace. . . But that mood also passed. . .

Totton found himself doing the work he had to do with a dull fury. Since the trip down-river it had utterly lost meaning. Years ago there had been a sort of joy in it. But then he had been young. Later there had been the sustaining dream of the time ahead. Now that was finished. Sometimes he would take a bright axe from a negro woodsman and clang it viciously, heedless of the sharp chips that snapped and jabbed against him.

Again and again, when they sat wordless in the lamplight, in the hot nights, without warning in the woods, in the leaden moments of the morning before Aloki's horn, the thought of the riverbank, like a knife stab would return and he would wish her dead so that he might again be free. Then in a flood of terror, pity, and remorseful love, it would be gone again. . .

In December Marion was taken ill with fever. He nursed her with utter disregard of everything. Only at her pleading insistence would he rest at all. He had brought a cot bed and set it in a corner

of her room where he could be always near her. Yet she knew quite well the attack was trivial and would soon pass. She sought his face continually, wondering if she understood the queer processes of his soul.

In a fortnight she was well and the days took up their common course again.

Totton returned from the woods one late afternoon to find her sitting in a canvas chair on the verandah, her hands folded in her lap.

He took off his hat, wiped the sweat from his face and neck and looked down at her. She returned his smile lightly.

"Tired?"

"No. . . What are you doing?"

Marion lifted her open hands. "Nothing."

He leaned back against a rock-hewn supporting pole. "Get's pretty dull for you, doesn't it?"

She shook her head. "No more than it does for you. Really not."

"Maybe that's so," he said heavily. At the end of a long pause he spoke again. "I got an idea."

"Is it as good as the last one?"

He stared, puzzled. "What was that?"

"Never mind. Go on."

He studied her curiously, seeking his memory, then went on. "How would you like to go down to Molala? Just for a vacation, I mean. It's not much of a place, but they have movies at the café. And there are some people to talk to. Judge Morin for one. It would be a change anyway. What do you think?"

She examined her hands in her lap and con-

sidered. "It would be fun. Of course." Her voice caught uncertainly and she stopped and looked levelly up into his face. "Can we afford it?"

"Sure." He sat on the steps, facing down the hill. "We haven't talked about it much, but I guess you know how matters stand that way as well as I do. I've got some money. I used to think it was quite a pile, but it isn't near enough to do anything real with. But in the meantime I don't see any point in hanging on to it so tight as I used to. I got you into sort of a jam. . ."

"Or I did you," she interrupted softly.

"We'll let that pass. . . Anyway, we are, and if we can have any fun around this rotten country we might as well. We could buy some things while we were down. I thought maybe a phonograph and some records would be nice. And we can buy every book we can find. Some loads of tinned stuff would be a change from country chop. And you can get some clothes."

"All right."

He turned to look at her but her eyes were down.

"When did you think you wanted to go?" she asked.

"Why, right away. I been working so damned hard lately I'm ahead a little, even by myself. Six or seven weeks wouldn't matter. . . What's the odds anyway? The company doesn't know any better'n my hat what happens off here, just so long as they get a shipment every year. I'll have that for them always. It's got to be a habit. There's nothing to keep you, is there?"

"I suppose not."

"No social engagements or anything?" he asked bitterly.

"I'd rather wait just the same. For a month or two."

"Why?"

"Must I have a reason?"

He got impatiently to his feet. "You don't have to do anything. Not even talk sense if you don't want to. You're a woman." He stopped, then an idea occurred to him. "Don't put it off too long. The rains begin in March."

She nodded.

"And the river gets high."

"I know."

He looked at her queerly. "I don't savvy you at all. . ." He made a turn of the porch, his boots creaking noisily on the loose boards. He came to a halt in front of her again. "You feel like a little walk? I got to go down to the other side of the river and see how the boys are making out."

She rose with alacrity. "I'd love to. Just a second and I'll get my hat."

When they reached the path in the forest she took his arm companionably. "Even if I am horrid and difficult, you know I love you, don't you, Jeff?"

"Sure. You're not . . ."

She pressed his arm tighter. "You know I'm not ungrateful? You'll remember that? Whatever happens?"

He looked at her hastily. He tried to speak teasingly but his voice cracked. "Certainly. But nothing's going to happen I can do anything about.

Nothing bad . . . at least. . . But maybe I don't understand?"

"Perhaps not. Let's talk of something else."

She pleaded weariness and left him when they reached the bridge.

When he reached the far side he looked back at her through the concealing leaves. Marion had come out upon the bridge and stopped midway. With a pang of understanding he saw her tear loose a shred of bark and let it flutter down.

* * *

They did not start until the rains began. Marion betrayed a quiet, unreasonable stubbornness of which Jeff had not known her capable. Her vegetable garden on the hillside could not be left. The unremitting heat of the Long Dries was far worse than rain. The discussion held an unreality which troubled him. A hundred times his lips opened to vent the one telling argument and as often snapped uneasily shut again. It would not do to remind her Djombé flood had killed her lover.

He reflected methodically upon possible danger. It existed, of course. Gene had proved that with terrible conclusiveness. But the prospect slid over his consciousness without finding entrance or deep meaning. Reasonable precautions, sober judgments, these things had gone stale in him since the plan of his life had altered. Yet his feeling of dominance of the forest and its chances remained. If life was beyond his handling, at least Djombé River and the jungled world was not. . . Perhaps she was not

afraid because she trusted him. Nothing would happen . . . quite evidently, nothing ever would.

The blast upon Aloki's horn the morning of departure found them already awake. They had been roused long before by the movement of the waiting men in the morning dark. Twelve natives from Lolill town were to porter for them. In sleepy silence they drank black coffee, strapped the final boxes, and gave orders for the start.

The dawn came as they were leaving the yard. The twelve men, the boxes on their heads, were already jogging down the hill. Marion touched Jeff's hand and turned to look back. The eastern sky was roseate and streaked with gold. Against it the squat silhouette of the little house seemed somber, desolate, a futile, ugly little human thing to be framed so magically. They had left it only an instant since, but emptiness appeared to have settled in eternally.

"A phonograph and things will cheer it up a good deal," Jeff suggested.

"In a way, I've loved it as it is," she answered. She took his hand and bending her head a little, held it to her cheek, her eyes still fastened on the dark house and the grandeur of the sky beyond. "I've grown up, Jeff," she said softly. "I'm afraid you think I've been discontented, but it isn't true. I've had a chance few ever have, deeply to know one person and one place. . . And our river. That, I know, is immortal, so it cannot matter greatly if I'm not." She gently released his hand. "There is so much time, Jeff dear. . ."

He could find no answer to that reassurance and

she went on as if there had been no halt. "People in Africa have always complained, haven't they, that they feel shrunken and trivial because everything here is so vast and old? That they feel overpowered?"

"I have heard something like that," Jeff answered. "Look here, those carriers will get so far ahead we'll be half the day catching up with them."

"There's no real hurry is there? . . Please. . ." Please. . ."

Totton opened his mouth, shut it and shook his head. "I guess there's no hurry."

"Why should anyone complain?" she insisted. "I mean of feeling small and unimportant? It seems to me that simplifies things so much. . . Jeff . . . when I was a little girl I used to dream that when I grew up I was going to be terribly important and would do important things. But I never would have, of course, and then I would have been unhappy. . .

"It's much more comfortable," she ended slowly, "to realize that all a little person needs to do is a very little thing. . ."

Totton laughed abruptly. "You give a man the fidgets. I'll bet you don't know what you're talking about any more than I do. Let's get along."

They looked together once again toward the bungalow. Marion waved her hand.

"I feel kind of funny, leaving it," Jeff confessed. "Suppose when we come back we pull the damn thing down and build a new one? I can order some stuff in Molala. Hardware and things. We can

figure out what we need. . . No point in not being comfortable, is there?"

He scuffed his feet through the low grass, dully regretted having spoken. He had meant to be enthusiastic, boyish, and he realized he had failed. Marion made no response and quickening his pace he strode ahead. The trail, after all, was too narrow for them to walk abreast.

* * *

He was across the hammock bridge and gone before she came to it. He did not wait on the far side nor did he look back.

* * *

Within an hour he overtook the porters. They sat by their loads, their tiny clay pipes to their pursed lips, and long before he came to them he could hear the gentle singsong of their talk, talk as eternal and mysterious as their immortal summer world. They stopped and watched him shyly as he passed. From then on the caravan kept consistent order, Totton, then the carriers and Marion alone behind them all.

The men reached the town at the end of the day's march so long before her that Totton spent an hour of irritable concern. But when she came in sight he gulped his anger with a sensation of remorse. . . There was, of course, no hurry. There was so much time. In the everlasting woods haste was as ridiculous as life itself. . . There was bitterly little satisfaction in that faith. . . Soon the

long shadows of the trees reached out to shelter the twilit town.

* * *

Toward nine o'clock the third morning from Lolill the path sloped upward, the trees thinned and gave way to shabby, littered native fields. In a few moments Totton heard the sound of swiftly running water and quickened his pace till he reached the high bank. Below him swirled the river.

This was the place where Gene Bryce had drowned. On just such a gray and murmurous morning . . . A year ago, almost to the day. From this place Marion, because she had not known what else to do, had kept on along the path, along the path to where he waited her.

His lips felt withered and he licked them carefully. He focused his eyes on the current until they felt dry and strained. He wet his lips again, with measured care took off his ragged helmet, found a handkerchief and wiped the rain from the channels in his cheeks. A wood-pigeon cooed in a treetop. A breath of wind rattled the raindrops noisily amid the leaves.

So this was where Gene had died. . . What a slender, slender chance to cause such changes. If it had not happened, what different courses would their three lives have run. A chance, a mere trick, an accident. And yet . . . the idea spread insistently through his consciousness . . . how curiously hard it was to associate empty chance with Djombé River. If ever a thing bespoke more cer-

tain plan. . . He laughed shortly, uneasily. Africa had made him as superstitious as a native.

But what . . . but what if the chance—or plan—had taken her instead? He would never have seen her, never loved her, and he would be free. . . There was enough for one.

"Oh, God damn it!" The words came out of him aloud in a grunting cry. He shook his head like a dog with burrs in its ears, squeezing one hand over the other so violently they hurt.

The voices of the carriers became audible and he tensed his body stiffly and began an examination of the crossing. For the first time he became conscious of the bridge tree they had felled to take the place of the one that had been smashed away. He saw that it was dangerously slight, less than a foot in diameter. The trouble of his mind turned to irritation.

The porters had come up and stood behind him. He turned to a man he knew had been one of the caravan on that past occasion. He shook his fist in his face and pointed behind with the other hand.

"What's the idea?" he shouted. "You no savvy small stick no be fit for bridge? You black bastards too bloody lazy to cut big size, huh?"

The wet brown forehead, wrinkled by the weight of the heavy box above it, puckered with mystification.

"No, sah, yes, sah!" the porter spluttered.

" 'No, sah, yes, sah!' you damn fool!" Totton's open hand slapped the man's face.

Marion's voice made him drop his arm. His breath came gustily.

"What's the matter, Jeff?"

He took her by the arm, turned his back on the startled blacks and conducted her to the river bank.

With an effort he steadied and lowered his voice. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm tired or something. Don't say anything to that poor devil . . . I . . . I . . . can't think what got into me. But look," he pointed to the log, "that fool job made me sore."

"You mean it's small? Don't blame them. If it was wrong I should have said so at the time. We crossed quite easily a year ago by holding hands."

There was a pause. Her hand in his, they watched the running stream.

"Aloki told me, Jeff," Marion said dreamily, "that the natives believe Papa Djombé is a god, all-powerful and all-wise. I wonder . . . I wonder if that isn't true?"

"People out here get queer ideas. . . Let's get along. You've got into the worst habit of wasting time."

"I promise, dearest, I won't any more."

Jeff beckoned. "Come on, you boys."

One by one the negroes scrambled through the lopped and withered branches till they stood upon the trunk. They balanced their loads carefully on their heads and caught hands. The lead man began slowly to sidle across. The carrier Jeff had struck hung back doubtfully, his soft eyes on his master. Totton smiled at him kindly.

"Come on, boy. You catch hold here and Mammy, she go between us."

He helped the man up and adjusted his load for him. He assisted Marion to a position between them. The porter took one of her hands and he the other. They were in a linked line now, with the first man already two-thirds over.

Marion disengaged their grips and took them by the wrists instead.

"This way will be better, Jeff," she said.

A muffled quality in her voice made him eye her curiously. They moved out along the bridge. The river, a yard under them, swam dizzily. One pace, two, three. . . The line tautened, stretched out till their arms were lifted high, hands pulling hands. Linked fists along the way seesawed erratically to preserve the delicate balance. The log was so narrow no one dared lift his feet. They slid and shuffled sideways.

Totton's position was most difficult. As last man his support was slightest. He wished Marion had not insisted on taking his wrist. It gave him no control, complicated his equilibrium. . .

With a spasm of sudden nausea he felt her grip relax. He teetered, waved his arms. He saw her hands go up.

She lunged down so swiftly it almost seemed she leapt. The splash she made flung water in his face. In the same instant he saw the man ahead, unbalanced by his heavy load, begin to fall. Jeff staggered forward, seized the porter by an arm and they fell together crosswise of the log, clinging by knees and elbows. The breath smacked out of him.

The porter's pack struck the water with a second splash. By the time he had turned about Marion had vanished.

Totton hung to the trunk, stunned. His mind was reeling and he felt as if he were strangling from shock and horror. Somehow he regained foothold, with a great cry scrambled back to the near bank and leaped down. The other porters had reached the farther side in safety and were running through the grass downstream.

* * *

They searched through the reeds at every bend all that day and camped at night at the crossing in hastily made grass shelters. They had not found her. Djombé gave up nothing.

At dusk the carriers made little fires and crouched around them. Totton sat apart from them on a charred wet log that lay half concealed in weeds. His manner was dazed and dull and old. Since the morning his lips had been locked in a thin, gray line. A thorn had torn his shirt nearly from him and his bronzed shoulders, relaxed and queerly futile, showed through.

He rose stiffly and walked to the river's edge. The negroes by the fires raised their eyes and watched him furtively. A yellow moon, low in the sky, illumined the commencement of the night. A shimmering lane crossed the black river.

Marion was dead.

Papa Djombé . . . Djombé River . . . had got her too.

And the fault was his.

That realization had slowly permeated all his mind. She had missed her footing, thrown up her hands to save herself and fallen. And he had saved the negro. The devil in him that had wished her dead had made the choice. It was clear to him.

He was sure, now that the day was done, that he had worked it out. Their hopeless seeking in the muddy reeds had given him no respite from the painful winding and unwinding of his thoughts. He was not an imaginative man. But surely all things must have cause and reason. Sometimes they were obscure, but he held the deep conviction that there was one certain guide. If one faced things squarely. His father back in Michigan had called it conscience. . . Yes, he could have caught her. There had been a choice and, driven by the fearful wish that had so tortured him, he had let her fall and not put out his hand. The bitter self-accusation was a strange relief. Amid the shattered ruin that his life had suddenly become the placing of the blame was one thing solid. If destiny was wholly foolish chance one would grop-ingly go mad. There were accounts that must be balanced, penance to be paid. . .

His tongue felt woolen. His lips opened stupidly, and a word came through.

"Murder!"

He fuddled the syllables like a drunken man. The mask of his face in the moonlight bore no expression. Only his eyes seemed alive. They watched with wondering intensity the flow of the

current where it vanished in the blackness under overhanging trees.

* * *

Judge Morin sat with friends on the terrace of the Hotel Grand. Although it was not yet six, the café was already nearly filled. The barefoot waiters shuffled busily between the little green iron tables. Occasionally a loud fizzing and the rattle of a Perrier top on the concrete floor sounded out above the hum of talk.

Pernod — Grenadine — Rafael — Byrrh — the glasses clinked and lifted happily and the gay talk ran smoothly on.

The young Port Chief interrupted himself in mid-epigram. "Look, Morin, is not that your friend?"

The Judge leaped to his feet and rushed forward.

"My dear friend Totton! But how delightful! You have arrived just now?"

Totton shook hands. "I wanted particularly to see you. I went over to the Tribunal but when there wasn't anyone around I figured you'd be over here." His drawn face lighted in a fleeting smile, then settled to lines of dogged pain.

"Ah, I see." Morin bobbed his head with quick understanding. "I suspect you mean privately. Then let us sit here." He scraped back a chair. "It is so pleasant to see you . . . still more if I can help you."

"I don't want to take too much of your time. Keep you from your friends." Jeff leaned back with drooping shoulders and his hands fell mute

between his knees. He looked wearily ahead of him.

"I want you to understand I came to see you not because you were my friend. . ." The words were spoken so flatly they seemed to have no meaning. It was as if they had been memorized.

"But because of your job," he went on. "Officially, understand? . . I came to give myself up."

Morin moved creakingly in his chair. An explosion of loud laughter came from some men at a nearby table. He leaned nearer. "Perhaps," he suggested quietly, "you had better explain from the beginning?"

Jeff gave him a quick look of gratitude and his eyes fell again. "You knew I was married, didn't you?"

"Günter came through six months ago. But tell me as if I knew nothing."

Totton cleared his throat with a nervous jerk and after a moment's fumbling began. One clipped, matter-of-fact sentence followed the next through the whole, long, weary story which he told. Once he stopped and with a shaking hand carefully wiped his mouth. Morin smoked a cigarette and watched the gray smoke droop away. Now and then it was necessary for Jeff to raise his voice to be heard above the crackling laughter and the pop of corks.

". . . I didn't think about the money for a long time. . . I was in a kind of dream at first. . . Then it came to me, just as a proposition, you know, that if she were dead, everything would be like it was before. . . Though I loved her, I couldn't keep it out of my head. It kept coming

back and back. It wore me out. . . I'm getting old, Morin. . .

". . . Somehow the river was all mixed up in my mind. I didn't think at the moment, though she said something queer, but she made us let go her hands and took the boy's wrist and mine and held on that way. . ."

"What was it she said?" Morin interrupted softly. He had let his cigarette go out.

"She said 'It will be better this way.' . . It seems funny now. . . The point is, something made me grab for the boy instead. And I could have saved her if I'd wanted to. It's the same as if I'd done it all. . . So I thought it over that night and came on down here. . . There wasn't anything else to do. . ."

There was silence between them for a moment. Morin ground out his cold cigarette with elaborate care.

"Have you then," he asked almost in a whisper, "no longer your desire? There is . . ."—his voice caught—"there is a ship tomorrow."

Totton wiped a hand tremulously across his face. "Why, why, no. No, I don't believe I have. Not after all that's happened."

Morin bent nearer. "Ah, but why not?" He touched the back of Jeff's hand with a soft forefinger. "Is it really possible that you do not understand? That you do not realize what that girl has done? And why?" His brown Latin eyes misted surprisingly.

"What do you mean?"

"'It will be better this way,'" he quoted.

"Surely, surely you understand . . . your river and she?"

"I don't know what you mean. I thought it all out and I came down to you. You've . . . you've got to arrest me. I've got to make it square."

Morin jerked a hand through the air. "Dismiss that, please," he said impatiently. "Please," he repeated. He took one of Totton's hands in his with the delicate gentleness of a woman. "I would so like to be of help. We must find a reason . . . we must, we are so small, we must explain. . ." He hesitated and moved his left hand in a vague gesture. "Africa, Africa . . . in her rivers and forests, it is all here if we might grasp it, M'sieu Jeff. I am sure of that! There is something final and assured. In Africa there is no conflict, we are too small for that, there is merely—there is merely the solution."

He continued, almost pleading. "For you, your river points it. For me . . . I am not yet sure. . . But in this immensity a man need have no sense of waste. Follow your river, my dear friend. Call it simple accident, if you will, but just as it carries your logs and has ruled your life these many years it has now made all clear for the time ahead. It willed, she helping, that her time and her adventure were complete. She was, I imagine, quite content. . . Her love for you found out the perfect gesture. Do not, do not betray her plan! Follow your river!"

He rose to his feet, trembling with the force of his sympathy. "I seem abrupt, but let us talk no

more at present. There is so much, so much to think. . . Tomorrow. Sleep well tonight."

Totton watched dumbly while Morin's short figure vanished through the doorway in the dark. He had put out his hand too late to stay him. For a moment he looked dazedly over the heads and shoulders of the café crowd. Then he put on his helmet and climbed the stairs to his room. A lamp on the washstand was lit and he sat on the edge of the bed. The dozen battered, mud-stained boxes were ranged along one pink-plastered wall.

He sat there for a long time trying to review his thoughts. A deep lassitude pervaded him. He felt cheated. Perhaps he had been mad, but there had been so much satisfaction in the decision to come to Morin and confess. It had set a period to wondering. . . But he had, he *had* grabbed the boy instead. You couldn't altogether get away from that.

Suppose . . . suppose Morin was right. That she had leapt deliberately. That she had loved him so much as that. . . Extraordinary it hadn't occurred to him. He put his hands dazedly to his face, discovered he still had on his helmet and placed it on the bed beside him.

If she had done that, for him! A low moan came through his parted lips, his back bent and he buried his face in his hands. . . No, in God's name, not that . . . better anything than that.

Then what to do?

He looked stupidly at the row of trunks along the wall. His things and Marion's. . . If he was going away he'd have to make arrangements. Have

to repack and pack and get rid of things. . . Have to go back to the bungalow—to the empty bungalow that stood so lonely on the hill against the sunrise. Have to arrange for a successor. A living man couldn't simply quit. . . How futile it would seem. How empty everything must seem forever. Love had gone and there could be no more adventure.

A scraping phonograph began to play downstairs. He got up, locked the door behind him, and left the hotel. The unlighted streets were ghostly and deserted. In a few minutes the chug of the donkey engine and the hum of voices were left behind.

Occasionally a shape would pass him in the dark and a soft voice give him salutation. "Evenin', massa. . . *Bon soir, M'sieu.*" The vague figure would dissolve and leave him alone again.

The road he followed aimlessly ended on a rise that overlooked the silent harbor. He stopped and the scene enveloped him like a caress. The yellow crescent lay a shining trail across the water. The mastlights of a ship moored in midstream swung a little back and forth across the blue-black sky. Tiny fires along the water's edge showed where native boatmen cooked their evening meal. His memory harked back. Memories now must always take the place of dreams. There was nothing any tomorrow could offer half so precious as the past. "This is the most beautiful country I have ever seen," she had said to him that sunset hour a year ago. . .

He slowly picked his way down a steep path that led to the waterside.

Where the trail went through deep shadow near the border of the road he stumbled over some one and nearly fell. A figure hastened apologetically to its feet.

They moved into the moonlight. It was the man he had saved from Djombé River.

"I sorry, massa. I sleep and I no see you."

"That's all right. Go back to sleep. Good night." They both spoke softly, in voices appropriate to the night.

A hundred yards farther on he passed the last of the silent stores. A spit of land sloped down to the river's edge. He went down it, avoiding the littered refuse in the grass.

The tide ran out and the ripples of the current softly lipped the land. Beyond there somewhere in the dark Djombé River joined the sea. The great, wild river of the woods was here serene and old at last.

A calm peace came over him. . . What was it Morin had said. "Do not betray her plan. . . Follow your river . . . it has made all clear for you. . . In Africa there is no conflict, we are too small for that. . ."

Yes, of course.

Djombé had adventured and now it was content to end. . . Follow your river. . . He, too, had adventured. They were partners. . . Perhaps after all there was a plan, a cause and reason, some circle to be joined.

He hesitated, turned, and retraced his steps to the road.

By one of the warehouses he stopped and called softly.

"Boy."

"Sah?" The negro got sleepily to his feet and came to him.

"Boy, you savvy where my other boys be?"

"Yes, massa."

Jeff reached into his pocket and put a roll of paper money into the porter's hand.

"You get 'em sun time tomorrow and go for Lolill? You savvy?"

"Yes, massa."

"Good night, boy."

"Good night, massa."

Totton returned to the point of land. He took off his helmet, placed it on a discarded packing box and put a heavy stone in it to keep it from blowing away.

"As if when the waiting were over, the beauty would end." She had said that too, on that afternoon so long ago. . .

He walked into the water. Three long strides and he was swimming. With strong, easy strokes he directed his course out toward the open sea. In a moment the dark banks had faded, merged into the tropic night.

"Follow your river . . . Djombé River . . . In this immensity a man need have no sense of waste. . ."

[FUNK]

"MAGIC?" The Bank Manager leaned back reflectively. "I don't know. Is it mood or medicine, as vague as a dream or as definite as an experiment in physics? You've only been in Africa a fortnight. It's your place to tell me."

"And you, how long?" I asked.

He smiled.

"How shall I reckon? Through two eruptions of the cone up there. Through rain enough to cover Europe twenty fathoms deep. . . Bless my soul, is it quinine or your foolish face? My conversation practically rhymes. If you really want to know, I've been on the Coast for eleven years and some days. 'How long, O Lord, how long!' "

" 'When found, make a note of.' "

"Huh?"

"Captain Cuttle, *Dombey and Son,* Charles Dickens," I explained.

"If you can read, what did you want to come down here for?"

"Just a social climber," I suggested. "But you're wandering. This magic business. I've heard some remarkable tales. What the deuce is it . . . funk, perhaps?"

"You mean the blacks are simply afraid? Possibly. A witch doctor has the awesome quality of any great tradition. But there's a hitch in that. A man who is afraid automatically resists. Fights back. He can't help it. But take my word for it, no one fights black magic, not in Africa. . . Could you stand a story?"

"I can stand anything."

"Stout fella." The Bank Manager busied himself for a moment among the bottles on the table, then leaned back. He submerged happily for a moment, the blue eyes twinkled, and he went on.

"First place—let's have some atmosphere. That's important on the West Coast. All-important. Down here atmosphere, the thing writers and restaurant proprietors are always jabbering about, isn't just background. It's foreground. Usually it's the whole story. Look out the window there and shut up for a minute and you'll see what I mean."

"*I* shut up?" I began indignantly. But the Bank Manager had taken his own advice.

We had come for the week-end to a "bush-house" halfway up the mountain, ostensibly to shoot some leopard by the moon—if we should feel energetic. Eight miles up the road was a John Holt factory and eleven miles down the same road one came to the port. In between, except for one or two native settlements, there was nothing.

The window behind my chair was small and

high, fringed at the top with a black, ragged line where the thatch hung down. Outside, a tall oil palm cut its stately silhouette against the night sky. There was no wind, yet its dry fronds whispered livingly. Ghostly snakes of vine hung down from it. That was all, but over us and over everything hung the throbbing, breathing silence of the tropic night. Somewhere behind the house a branch snapped. A sausage fly flung itself against the lantern and fell to the floor.

"Africa," said the Bank Manager, "is the only continent I know where the sense of vastness is inescapable. Even the air seems ancient sometimes —as if the old monsters of the swamps had breathed it first and sort of got the savor out of it.

"But this is Cameroons. We aren't in it. Do you know the Benin River country in Southern Nigeria? Because if you don't, my dear fellow, you're in luck. . .

"We had a branch bank up there about five years ago at a place called Bulambo. There was my assistant and myself, the Assistant District Commissioner, and an old timer at the Hatton and Cookson factory. We four whites and about a hundred swamp natives were the population. There were three European houses, some tin sheds on the beach and the native town. A cheery hole. Exhilarating, if you understand me. If a chap had a passion for canoeing, there were about fifteen thousand miles of connected creeks and rivers—the whole Niger Delta—at his disposal. But there wasn't any walking. Bulambo occupies about ten acres of fairly dry land. Around it is nothing but the river and

miles upon miles of mangrove swamp, mud, water, snakes and roots. And hot! Hell is a winter resort in comparison. Sticky, steamy heat with nary a breeze.

"Naturally we whites had a good dose of each other's society. And our contact with the natives was much closer than is usual. Couldn't help but be. I mean, when the Bulambo brought out their drums and danced they did it fifty yards from our windows. When their people died we could hear the women singing. We knew them all by sight and many by name—the chief and his wives, the witch doctor, Sokinoma, he was called . . . all of 'em.

"There, ordinarily, the intimacy stopped. The A.D.C., in fact, was considerably annoyed at having the beggars jammed up under his chin, felt it wasn't altogether consistent with his official dignity. He had a vague notion it would be politer if they moved into the marsh somewhere—waist-deep in mud, I suppose.

"I didn't care. I don't fancy the African particularly, so I've developed a blindness. I wouldn't know there was a black man in sight if I was reviewing the Nigerian Rifles. What Shaw, the Hatton and Cookson man, felt on any subject I don't know. Or care.

"But my assistant—he was a nice thin young fellow with black hair and eyes that made me feel like his mother every time I looked at them—was absolutely tickled.

"The night he arrived—a Dutch freighter cruising the rivers for logs and palm oil put him down

in the front yard—there was a jamboree of some kind; two men with tom-toms, two with palm-fiber harps, the women swaying in a line chanting, the young bucks dancing in the firelight. You know the sort of thing. Civilization checked with the pile of pants outside.

"Well, Croker—that was his name, by the way, Jimmy Croker—absolutely loved it. We were sitting on the verandah slapping mosquitoes and this business was going on just across the yard.

" 'This is gorgeous,' says he. 'This is perfectly marvelous. Don't know as I'll be able to spare much time for your silly bank. Why, there are no barriers at all. I'll have the time of my life.'

" 'You make me very happy, darling,' says I. 'You'll find that barriers is just one of about twelve thousand things Bulambo hasn't got. That's why we love it so.'

"But I couldn't put him off. It seems that all through school anthropology had been a kind of hobby of his. He'd read Spencer and Tylor and Boas and Westermarck and the rest of the big men and even that hadn't discouraged him. That was one reason he'd tried for a West African job. The blacks and the browns and the yellows, he told me frankly, had his respect far more than the whites. He wasn't especially impressed with a civilization that could find nothing better to do than hide in ditches for four years and bean itself with shrapnel.

"The next afternoon, as soon as we shut up shop he put on his nice new sun-helmet and was off. A few minutes later I looked out the window and

there he was, sitting on a low stool in front of Chief Bulambo's hut, his helmet on his knees and the chief's three weeks' old baby in the hat. Old Bulambo was sitting beside him and some women were standing around and all of them were jawing away like a family reunion. I was rather pleased. It would keep the kid out of trouble, I fancied. There are lots worse vices than anthropology to gobble up a youngster on his first tour down here. And in a small place like Bulambo the 'losing caste' thing didn't matter, in spite of the way the A.D.C. cried into his whiskey about it.

"Every day he followed the same program. After he was finished with his work—and Croker was the best assistant I ever had, I might mention—he'd pop across the yard and fraternize for all he was worth. His ambition was to learn the language and, with that as a key, enter into their ways of thinking, their legends, magic and the rest.

"Pretty soon he began to pick up a few words, in three months he was adept. He knew every man, woman and child by name. And at last he got pally with the really big man—the witch doctor Sokinoma, a dried-up, wise-looking old chap whom we rarely saw.

"At night sometimes he'd come into my room, sit on the edge of the bed and give me a yarn. . . He told me how a white rag hung from the end of a bending pole moves in the starlight and sets a tune for the pale swamp ghosts to dance to; how when a black mother loses her first-born she can mend her heart with a mess of blood and dirt that sets the cycle going round again—a life back to

the land-mother it came from. Why it was, in terms of their philosophy, that Sokinoma could reach into the grass and pick up a six-foot hooded cobra as casually as you'd handle so much rope.

"He was making extraordinary progress. He had begun a Bulambo dictionary, a thing no one had ever attempted. I began to catch a queer, rapt, religious look on his face sometimes. . . And I began to notice something else." The Bank Manager broke off.

"Look here." His eyes roamed the matting covered walls. He pointed to a huge house-spider that sprawled at the edge of the glow of lantern light. "Spiders, giant cockroaches, lizards in bed with you . . . that sort of business. Do they get on your nerves?"

I shook my head. "No. I can't say they do. They gave me the jumps a bit the first few days, but then I fitted them into the landscape. I don't mind them now."

"Put the sugar in your tea, wait a minute till the ants come up, bail 'em out and carry on?"

"Exactly."

"Croker had the same experience. Jibbed at the fauna for about forty-eight hours, then forgot it. But he changed again.

"He started being careful about tucking in his net. Then I noticed he always shook out his pajamas and hit his slippers on the floor before he put them on. It would have been trivial, sound sense, in fact, if he had known he was doing it. But he didn't. He gave me the curious impression that he was being ridden—ridden by subconscious

fear. Invisible Africa was getting on his nerves. He'd gone in too deep."

"What do you mean?"

"He'd 'gone native' spiritually. It's an intangible thing and hard to explain. But any old Coaster would understand me. There are qualities and kinds of fear. A big black Bulambo with his hair in plaits, tattoed ridges all over his face and chest, and a fish-spear and handkerchief by way of costume is, for example, superficially fearless. He's no more afraid of the Governor of Nigeria than, er . . . the Governor's wife and he'll charge a machine gun as quick as wink. But watch that same man about his daily business. Watch him avoid a certain stone, carefully twist off a cocoanut so as not to hurt the branch, do anything rather than pass a certain point. Why? Simply because he believes that not seeing a thing does not argue that it does not exist, that the world is thronged with dangerous forces, and that nothing animate or inanimate is devoid of life.

"Croker gave me exactly the same impression. Then he absolutely proved it.

"One afternoon he was fiddling with some papers on my desk, looking for something. I heard him suck in his breath in a curious, frightened way, and looked up.

"He had a blue print in his hand and was as white as a sheet. 'What the devil's this?' he asked.

"I took the paper from him and looked at it. It was a plan of the Bank's Bulambo property with the place marked on it where we were going to build a new vault. I didn't savvy at all. Croker

knew as much as I did, I thought, about the new vault. Anyway, I saw nothing to get excited about. . . By the way, I wonder if you know the sort of vault we build down here?"

"No."

"It's simply a small steel frame shed roofed and sided with corrugated iron and fitted with a strong door, usually built in the back yard of a Bank property. In a place like Bulambo, where the Bank handles the government tax money and where there is continual trade with natives who bring in kernels and palm oil, one naturally keeps a great deal of small coin on hand, shillings and sixpences and threepenny bits—paper not being current. And its bulk is out of all proportion. Therefore the vault —just a place to keep the spare currency boxes.

"But to get back to Croker. I asked him what the devil was up?

"He pointed to the plan. 'I didn't realize you were going to stick the vault just there,' he said. 'Because you can't.'

"He turned his back to me, walked over to the window and began to explain before I had a chance to say anything. 'Look at the plan,' he said. 'You notice that the vault is marked to go at the back of the property just at the edge of the swamp? Yes? Have you ever noticed there is a trail through the grass back there?' He turned to face me.

"I nodded. 'I have,' I said. 'I've often wondered where the deuce it led and who used it.'

"Croker looked straight at me. 'It begins behind Sokinoma's house and leads into the swamp. And

no one uses it except Sokinoma, the King Crocodile and the Bulambo dead.'

"At that I jumped up as if some one had fired a gun at me. 'What the hell are you talking about?' I shouted.

"Croker laughed—if you could conscientiously call it a laugh. 'Of course,' he said, 'as to the dead using it, I have only the word of the natives for that. It's their belief, I should say. But when it comes to Sokinoma and the King Croc using it—why, I've seen them a dozen times.'

"He waited for me to say something, but I hadn't the wind. He went on.

" 'Every morning at sun-up Sokinoma comes down the path from his hut carrying a basket of meat and fish—stuff contributed by everyone in town. At the same moment a big crocodile—an enormous creature fully sixteen feet long—comes out of the mud at the other end and crawls up the trail. Fact. About halfway Sokinoma tosses his stuff to the crocodile, then it turns around and goes back. The halfway point is marked by a little arch of palm leaves. And just there, old chap, is where you've marked the site of your precious vault. You see my point. What's infinitely more important than the crocodile feeding is that Sokinoma does not take his offering down the trail when a Bulambo dies. The mornings following a death all stay indoors and sing—you've heard them many times—and they think the soul of the dead person takes Sokinoma's place, goes down the path and is consumed by the croc. Becomes part of its soul, you know, and returns to the swamp. That's a very com-

Sokinoma came with his basket and stopped midway.

mon belief. The crocodile feeding scene is commonplace all up and down the coast.'

"Can you beat that? I thought I'd never get my mouth shut. There was Croker explaining the maddest stuff I'd ever heard with hardly more emotion than a school-teacher explaining algebra to the boy defective. I suppose I looked impressed. Jimmy grinned at me. 'Get up early tomorrow and I'll show you.'

"I said something clever like 'My eye!'

"Croker went back to his desk. 'So help me. I'd have told you long ago if I thought you'd be interested—or if Sokinoma wasn't so afraid that if it got out we'd turn the show into a sort of circus . . . But that vault is no go.'

"That's all we said just then. But sure enough, next morning Croker stirred me up when it was still dark and we went to a top floor window. He gave me a pair of field glasses."

The Bank Manager paused, produced a cigarette from his shirt pocket and tapped it emphatically on the table.

"You don't have to believe me, but I swear to you I saw just what Croker had described. Sokinoma came with his basket and stopped midway. A tremendous big crocodile sprawled and slithered itself out of the water and up the path . . . took the food and went away again. Just that. Since then I've looked up the thing in books and it seems to be generally known all up and down the coast. According to the experts, the crocodile fetish tribes all make a daily offering of food and one or more crocodiles soon learn the time and place, and form

the habit of coming. But believe me, that old black man and that damned lizard in the pale grass with the daybreak mists hanging round them made a picture.

"I came out of a kind of daze to hear Croker's voice. 'About the vault, now,' he said. 'You realize, of course, you've got to move it?'

"I looked at him. He meant it. Lord, how he meant it. All my little indistinct worries about him came to a head. I did some quick thinking and decided:

" 'Look here, Croker,' I said. 'The materials for that vault are at Lagos now. Within a few days the construction man will be here with them. He decided on its location, not I. It's the logical place for the thing. There, I think, it will go.' I took his arm. 'I don't care a hang about the vault, but I do about you. Take my advice. Drop this sort of thing and drop it quick. It's not a white man's game. Drink more, think less and put Africa away from you. It's a big trap and you'll be small game for it.'

"He nodded, said something about 'very well, of course I was the boss,' and left me.

"I thought about it then and later. I kept to my opinion that to go ahead would lay the invisible ghosts for him."

The Bank Manager wiped his face with a large, already moist handkerchief, and continued.

"At the end of the week, the *Benin*, an Elder Dempster local boat, put in, unloaded the materials for the vault and landed two passengers—the Lagos

construction man and a girl, Betty Shaw, daughter of old Shaw, the Hatton and Cookson manager.

"She was a surprise. Her existence, even. I haven't said much about Shaw for the reason there isn't much to say. He was a first-rate African trader verging a little on the palm-oil ruffian type. He drank like a fish and showed it no more, and kept a tight mouth. The girl herself was the first announcement of her coming.

"Croker and I were on the quay receiving the builder and getting the boxes off and old Shaw introduced us as soon as she was down the ladder. Said she was finished with school and had 'come down to keep her old father company.' In Bulambo, the poor ass!

"She had red-gold bobbed hair, a turned-up nose and marvelous eyes. She was wearing white, had a red Haussa-leather bag in her hand, and not a trouble in the world. She was as pretty as a magazine cover—and as common. Cruel and stupid and vain and unimaginative, all the commonplace faults. That was the way I sized her up. It took me about two minutes. But I'm an old-timer. In the same two minutes Jimmy Croker, with brains and breeding enough for three men, fell dazed in love.

"We seemed fated to have differences of opinion. But I was middle-aged and full of quinine and he was twenty-four and hadn't seen a white woman in six months. And, I admit it, Betty Shaw was pretty —pretty as a paper rose. I nearly burst that night trying to get to tell him what a fool he was. But I'd said say enough for then.

"They began seeing each other. She had nothing

to do and he was the only presentable white male. One afternoon he took her out in a native canoe. It was a beauty, one of the most exquisitely carved things I've ever seen, delicate and graceful as a bird. She called it 'quaint' and laughed at it. It wasn't nice neat green canvas and shiny varnish, so it was merely funny. Croker laughed with her, in an obliging, half-hearted way.

"Pretty soon Shaw had us over to dinner. All of us, the Lagos fellow and the A.D.C. included. A bad hour, that. We adults exhausted the chatty possibilities of the kernel trade in about five minutes and then it was up to Croker and Betty to keep things going. Which they did not.

"After dinner we all went out on the verandah and simply sat there brooding over our gins. Then Betty Shaw stretched back in her chair, stuck her legs out so her skirt slid halfway up her bare thighs and remarked. 'Cæsar, how *can* you go it? All the desert island yarns are simply blithering. Does anything *ever* happen here?'

" 'At least the desert island is inhabited.' Croker said.

"She made a mock bow. 'I didn't refer to present company.'

" 'Neither did I. I meant the natives.'

"She smiled. 'Dear me, I *did* forget the poor heathen. But just what do they contribute to Bulambo night life?'

"That was all Croker needed. He talked for half an hour. We men were all ears. Any knowledge we fancied we had of the country seemed childish when he told us what he knew. Fascinating

stuff, unquestionably. But the girl smoked cigarettes and smiled at him.

"He must have felt he wasn't making the impression with her he'd hoped, so to my surprise he topped off with the crocodile yarn. He told first of the legend that the lonely dead go down the trail at dawn to become part of the crocodile—to them the great spirit of the marshland that they love. Then he detailed the scene I'd witnessed.

"She was attentive, all right. 'Do you mean to say this goes on every morning?'

" 'Yes. If you like, I think I could arrange for you to watch. Would you care to?'

"At that she burst out laughing. To me it was like rubbing a knife-edge sideways on a plate. She positively crowed. 'Would I just? Ra-ther! See the funny nigger feed the tame crocodile? Sixpence, ladies and gents, and worth every farthing! For tuppence more can I see a bit of ghost gobbling? I beg Bulambo's pardon. It's a perfect Wembley. Tomorrow, then?'

" 'Perhaps not tomorrow,' Croker said. That was all and pretty soon we pushed along home.

* * *

"I realized that one of two things would happen. Either that scene would make him see what a fool she was or, for calf-love's sake, he'd switch to her view and let the magic business go hang. I couldn't for the life of me make up my mind which I'd prefer. He didn't show his cards until the following afternoon.

"We were in the office and the Lagos fellow

barged in and began to grouse about not being able to get any labor. He had his boxes open and every piece of stuff was numbered, but he'd found out that not a soul in town would have anything to do with him for any price.

"I'd rather expected something of the sort, but still I had no suggestions. I looked over to Croker's desk. He was working away with his lips set, looking sort of pale and worried. I didn't think he'd heard us.

" 'Jimmy, old man,' I began, but he swung round and started talking before I'd gone any further.

" 'You can change the site of the bloody thing. Put it twenty paces nearer the house, get a drier location and one easier to keep under observation —and not stir up a hornet's nest, which is incidentally a needless and stupid cruelty to a whole townful of people. . . You can either do that . . .'

"Then I broke in with some sort of noise intended to convey doubt. After all, the silly vault didn't have to be just there. But Croker interrupted me.

" 'Or,' he said, accenting the 'or,' '*or* you can take my canoe, go fifteen minutes' paddle up the creek to Bafang and get all the labor you need. The Bafang don't belong to the crocodile totem and they would welcome a chance to do the Bulambo a bad turn. What's more, I happen to know the chief's son is a trained carpenter. . . And in either case you can both damn well go to hell.'

"He turned back to the desk. I knew the girl had won.

"For upwards of a month there were no developments. The vault was finished and we moved in the currency boxes. We got a night watchman to come over evenings from Bafang.

"Sokinoma and his crowd made extraordinarily little fuss. A delegation of them called on the A.D.C. but they were frightened and their English was practically non-existent. So the Commissioner, not having the foggiest notion what it was all about, threw them out. Except that not one of them would go near the vault, that the whole town seemed to be wearing long faces, and that there was an unusual lot of doleful singing at night, there was no evidence that anything out of the way had occurred.

"The African is the most easily licked of human creatures—*on the surface.*

"Croker seemed to have lost interest in them. It was rarely now that he went over to the native side to have a chin-chin with his old pals. In their unaccusing fashion I believe they held him responsible for what amounted to a desecration of an altar, what to them appeared the greatest calamity in remembered history. Sokinoma cut him dead. In fact, the old man was rarely visible. He stayed indoors all the time. Croker practically quit working on his notes, on the book that was to be the fulfillment of the enthusiasm of his short lifetime. And when he did work on it he made excuses to his girl—damn her red head.

"It was March and the rainy season had begun. You know—clear days, and nights that would make Noah nervous. I used to wake up at night being

sympathetic for the poor Bafang watchman standing out in all that wet. He had built himself a little shelter of palm branches, but in rain like that it was useless.

"Then one evening he turned up sick. I saw him staggering out of his canoe, yelled for my boy and had a bed made up for him on the back verandah. He had pneumonia, obviously. Croker popped over to get Sokinoma to have a look at him—the old man was the leading doctor of Bulambo, of course, but Sokinoma turned him down flat. The vault, of course. By taking the watchman job the Bafang had put himself outside the pale, you understand.

"He checked out that night, poor chap. Absolutely like snuffing out a candle. . . And generally the Delta people can stand anything in the way of wetting. They're acclimated.

"Next day I paddled over to Bafang to hire a successor. No one seemed too keen on the job, but I raised the pay a bit, promised to build a tin shelter to make things more comfortable, and finally signed on one of the chief's younger sons. He was a fine big chap who wore nothing but a loin cloth, carried a carved paddle around with him all the time and had a rarely enthusiastic dislike for everyone in Bulambo. He seemed all right. There was no real point in having a watchman anyway, except that the London office insisted on it."

The Bank Manager eyed the acetylene lamp. "The silly thing's going out, isn't it?" he remarked.

I observed it long enough to be able to add my expert opinion that the silly thing *was* out.

"Damn," said the Bank Manager. "I'd better

push along. The moon there will do to turn in by, won't it? Filling acetylene lamps is no fit occupation for the white race."

I agreed. The moon was streaming directly in the window. The shadow of the ragged roof thatch drew grotesque, ghastly lines on my friend's face. He recommenced abruptly.

"A week later, about midnight, I heard the most frightful scream. Woke me up and addled my nerves so that I couldn't stir for a moment. I was just shakily getting my slippers on when Croker came in, said 'Something's up,' and grabbed an electric flash lamp. I got my shotgun and we went out on the back porch. It was a clear night with stars. And still! We could hear each other breathing.

" 'Ndita! Ndita!' Croker called. That was the watchman's name. The scream, we thought, had come from somewhere near the vault.

"No answer. A big night bird flew high overhead somewhere, zrumming its wings. Everything absolutely still, peaceful.

" 'We'd better go down and have a look,' Croker said.

"We went slowly, turning the lamp in all directions and at intervals called Ndita. No answer. We went right up to the door of the vault, getting our feet and pajama legs in the deuce of a mess from the wet grass. No sign of anything. Then we cruised back to the house, feeling a bit shaky. There seemed nothing we could do.

"With daylight the whole thing became clear. It was all patterned on the ground. That crocodile,

of course. Queer we'd never thought of it. We could see where the thing had crawled out of the swamp and up to the door of the vault where the watchman sat, most probably asleep. It had evidently taken one bite, knocking that one awful scream out of the man, then slithered back, dragging him under water in the marsh. They won't eat live meat, you know. . . It was all printed there in the mud. It gave us the creeps. Under the circumstances! After all, though, the place where the watchman sat was the crocodile's habitual feeding place. One could argue it was a natural death just as much as was the death of his predecessor. Damn near anything is a natural death in Africa except dying of old age.

"Croker said nothing. Not a single 'I told you so.' He was in love.

"On the surface he neither feared nor believed in magic any more. *On the surface* he'd adopted Betty Shaw's reasoning about such things. It was perfectly simple. Africans were niggers. That was that. Beneath contempt even, much less credence. A not unfamiliar point of view, you know.

* * *

"Of course there was nothing doing at Bafang for any more watchmen. Two even slightly related accidents is all you need on the Niger Delta to start a new religion. That vault was haunted by the spirits of the cheated dead—that's all there was to it. There was no use talking.

"I sent up to our Sapele branch for them to send

down a man who spoke no Bulambo and as little English as possible.

"He came two days later. I arranged with our cook to find a place for him to bunk in the tool shed under the house and that same evening he started work.

"I was as fair with him as I dared be. I told him about the croc, and to prevent the same thing happening again I gave him my gun and a big gasoline lantern to keep going. I also took the chair away from him to prevent his falling asleep.

"Nevertheless, I was anxious. The business had got on my nerves far more than I cared to admit. Sokinoma and his crowd had, it seemed to me, been entirely too quiet. Seemed too completely detached from what was going on to be really convincing. And I thought I'd caught a queer new note in their singing—a speeded-up, clamorous, almost gay quality. Several times in the course of the night I got up and went to look out the window. But the watchman's light was burning and I could see him standing on duty by the door.

"Croker's voice pulled me out of bed next morning. He was in his room next to mine leaning out of the window shouting at the watchman. He called several times, then shut up and came in to me.

" 'Look here,' he said, 'that new man is still on the job and doesn't answer when I yell at him. I can't make it out. Get up.'

"I put some shoes on and we went downstairs together. It was still early and the house boys weren't yet around.

"We could see the watchman from the verandah,

apparently, as Croker had said, still on duty. We walked quickly down the path toward him. He was stone dead. He was standing bolt upright, his back against the vault door. My gun, its stock on the ground, was held in his hand. And on his black face was the most frightful expression of pure terror I have ever seen. The eyes were wide open, the lips slightly apart, the nostrils dilated. Killed in an instant of unbelievable, dreadful fear.

"Croker grabbed my arm.

"'My God, look!' he said. He pointed down. There in the earth, soggy from the fall of dew, was the print of the body of a huge crocodile, the arc of the tail, the deep depression from its belly, the four prints of its clawlike feet, the wedgelike mark of its head. *But there were no traces anywhere of its departure or approach.* Simply, though the ground was everywhere soft, that isolated, uncanny spoor at the dead man's feet.

"I went over at once and got the A.D.C. and the three of us looked over the ground together. We were not mistaken. We examined that ground as if our lives depended on it. We were scared. I confess it. I could hardly seem to get my breath. The A.D.C. was so white I thought he was going to faint. But there was nothing. The dead man and the great sprawling, frightful mark. That was all.

"The Commissioner walked over to the native quarter to have a look round while Croker and I got the body into the house. He came back in a few minutes to say that not a soul in Bulambo, though it was now long after daylight, was abroad. They knew!

"We sat down to talk it over. There was, as far as we could see, nothing on earth to be done. The A.D.C. couldn't arrest the townspeople on a charge of corporate oversleeping. Yet that was the only sign they'd given.

"We had breakfast with the Shaws. Our servants and the Commissioner's, we discovered, had skipped. Simply vanished. None of them happened to be Bulambo boys and they'd lit out. We wondered how they'd come to know the latest development before we did. But there was no use wondering. We were hungry. On leaving the house we noticed the crocodile mark had been deliberately stamped out by bare footprints. One or several Bulambos had slipped out while we were in the house and trod up the neighborhood so there was nothing left.

"Shaw's boys were still on the job and he told us to come on in. He, I suppose, was so outside of the thing that his servants weren't afraid to stay, though to judge by their expressions while they gave us breakfast they weren't going to stick much longer.

"It was an intensely serious business. Shaw was furious. Said that unless something was done quickly the natives of the district would quit bringing in produce and Bulambo would simply vanish from the map. A sort of general strike, you know. We couldn't for the life of us figure how, but the deaths of the three watchmen were certainly connected. Sokinoma and the powers of magic had declared open war. I say magic now and I said

magic then simply because I know no other term that covers the facts—or the hopeless lack of facts.

"Betty Shaw, of course, was present at that breakfast. She listened politely until each one of us had had his say, then she took her turn. It was like a cold shower bath.

"She lit a cigarette and leaned back smiling in that devilish self-assured way. 'You're making yourselves ridiculous,' she told us. 'Four grown men tiptoeing around with their fingers crossed as if they actually swallowed ha'penny nigger nonsense. Be logical. A man dies of pneumonia. Well, why shouldn't he, in this climate? Then a crocodile slips out and drags away Number Two. Why not, again? It's the nature of the beast, isn't it? What do you think crocodiles live on, olives? And then the local crowd get it into their thick heads that if they can top off two coincidences with a third they will produce a tremendous effect. So what do they do?'

"The A.D.C. snorted. 'That's just what I'd like to know!'

"Betty just looked pert. 'Well, how's this for an explanation? Just offhand, of course. Why do you think the crocodile mark was destroyed the minute your back was turned? Perhaps to prevent your having a second look at it by broad daylight? Suppose, just for the sake of argument, it was merely a clever bit of sculpture done by a man who carefully obliterated his own tracks when he had finished and backed away? That would cover the thing, wouldn't it?'

" 'My dear child,' said the A.D.C. 'the man was dead.'

"Betty waved her hand airily. Nothing could trouble that red head.

" 'Nothing easier,' she explained. 'A witch doctor in the correct costume jumping out of the dark would scare anyone to death, wouldn't he?'

"We were silent. There might have been a little, a very little in what she said. We were desperate for an explanation, anyway.

"Croker was impressed. I imagine it was the most constructive job of thinking he'd ever heard her perform. He was absolutely soft-eyed with admiration. He leaned forward. 'But what shall we do?' he asked.

"She reached across the corner of the table and patted his hand. 'Do the regular thing, of course.'

" 'What?'

"She smiled again. '*Lay* the ghost! After all, what is this except the old haunted house yarn all over again? Let Jimmy here in the rôle of the young hero spend the night in the vault. He can take plenty of cigarettes with him. I say inside the vault because there there won't be danger from anything but ghosts—which, after all, is what we want to lay. And I hardly think ghosts will bother Jimmy. What do you think?'

" 'As for me,' I said, 'I'm against it completely. It's perfect nonsense.'

"The girl turned to me. She was angry. 'You may think he'd be afraid, but I don't,' she said.

"Damn her, do you see? She had him. I saw through her at once. Simply the fool girl feeding

her own cursed vanity by making her lover do some brave thing. She was bored and this was her way of amusing herself. Jimmy Croker, though, didn't realize. He couldn't take his eyes off her face. He nodded.

"To my disgust the A.D.C. agreed. Quoted instances from his experience where a white man had showed up some native myth or other and ended it on the spot. . . The poor beggars have a tremendous respect for us, you know.

"That afternoon I had a talk with Croker. He was frank enough with me. Told me he didn't favor the idea particularly, that he was frankly nervous. Especially since he'd been against that cursed vault from the beginning. But it seemed he had asked Betty Shaw to marry him and that she hadn't given him her answer yet. So naturally he didn't dare back out. He would look the coward and it might be all up with him then. He said he'd figured a way to keep himself occupied during the night, to keep his nerves from getting *too* badly frayed there in the dark. He was going to take a hammer and nail down the lids of some currency boxes that we were going to ship down-river the next day. It would be something to do, and if he made a botch of it, then no matter. You know how it is when you're alone in the dark—if you can find a piece of string and make cats cradles—anything of that sort, it keeps you from getting fidgety.

"About nine o'clock in the evening we all walked over to the native town and the A.D.C. made a speech. Called them all sorts of names for being silly and superstitious and told them how Jimmy

was going to show them the vault was the safest place in Nigeria. They listened carefully enough, but I couldn't tell whether they were impressed or not. I noticed old Sokinoma on the outskirts of the crowd. He had a queer, vicious little smile on his face. . . Jimmy, remember, was the one white man his tribe had ever trusted and he, it seemed, was mocking them worst of all. Croker felt it, I think, and it must have hurt. But with that girl beside him with her hand in his, nothing else in the world mattered.

"We made the thing as ceremonious as possible. Escorted Jimmy in great state over to the vault and ushered him in. Betty spoiled the dramatic timing just a trifle by remembering he didn't have his overcoat and running up to his room to get it. One really does need a coat down here in the rainy season. It gets chilly at night. I liked her little show of decent female tenderness.

"He gave us a half-hearted grin and went inside. I three-quarters closed the door on him. We stood around a few minutes, not exactly knowing what to do next and then we said good night and left. I climbed the steps of the back porch and stood there in the shadows watching. The crowd of natives hadn't entirely dispersed yet and I didn't want any monkey business to take place right under my nose. It was a windy night and raveled rain clouds scudded through the sky. But a bright half-moon hung above the swamps and I could see pretty clearly. Gradually the group of natives thinned. In the vague light it was like the slow disintegration of a shadow. There wasn't a sound of a whis-

per or the rustle of a blade of grass. They were impressed, all right. It occurred to me maybe the Commissioner was right—that if all went well they'd really be convinced. In a few minutes only one was left—Sokinoma. The silhouette of his weedy, skinny little body was unmistakable. He stood perfectly quiet, facing the vault door, perhaps a dozen paces away from it. I watched him as I would a snake. Then a queer thing happened.

"He drew himself together and with a curious rhythm began to lift his arms over his head. I've never seen quite the same gesture. Ordinarily, you know, when a man lifts his arms they fan out. Sokinoma's didn't. They crept up along his sides like snakes, then seemed to grow into the air—a weird, commanding, ghostly gesture. I had the delusion he had grown immensely tall. I was just going to shout at him when a denser cloud obscured the moon and everything was blotted out. The wind carried the cloud past in what seemed no more than a fraction of a second and then the light streamed out. That old magician had vanished. I suppose I was upset and credulous, but I swear it seemed to me he had leapt away into the sky. A trick of the light, of course. But his shadow, when that cloud came, had appeared to attenuate and dart in an arc of blackness up and away across the marsh."

The Bank Manager replenished his glass. "Of course, in actual fact, I suppose he'd merely taken advantage of the momentary darkness and made a break. Done it for effect, you know. But it didn't make me any easier in my mind, believe me.

"I hung around for a little then went to bed. I got a book and read. That is, I turned the pages at decent intervals. I never will know *what* I read. I only knew sleep was out of the question. After perhaps an hour I couldn't stand it any longer and got up and put on mosquito boots over my pajama legs and went out.

"From the porch I could hear the sound of his intermittent hammering and knew he was all right. Poor kid, toiling away on those currency boxes by the touch system—fighting phantoms with a hammer and a box of nails. . .

"I had sense enough, at least, not to walk near the vault. The sound of my tiptoeing around in the grass would have given him the horrors. But I walked everywhere else. First, I made a cruise of the native end. Not a soul about. The crazy little shacks were all boarded up tight. A heavy mist was rising from the ground so I seemed to walk in cloud. And the grotesque shadows of the huts playing on it, made the whole scene seem like a madman's dream. I found Sokinoma's hut and stuck my head in the door. He wasn't there. There was no sound except the rushing of the wind among the treetops and the far-away plaintive calling of a bird. The clouds were thickening and running fast.

"I walked along the waterfront toward the other end. I looked up at Shaw's house and saw a light in one of the windows. I happened to know it was Betty's room. I don't know why, but it cheered me up no end. Evidently she couldn't sleep either.

At least poor Jimmy's luck had two guardians that night.

"I hung around for a little, then realized it was growing black dark. A great flash of lightning made everything blaze blue-white, the next second there was an immense boom of thunder and the rain came. Glory, did it come! Like a waterfall under pressure. I had quite a time making the house—arrived at last looking like a cat found in one of those Roman galleys in the Thames mud.

"I rubbed down and got into clean things and went to bed. The last thing I remember was the roaring and the booming of the rain on the tin roof and the sound of its lashing on the river."

The Bank Manager rose from his chair and walked to the door of the hut. After a pause he went on. His back was turned to me.

"I woke up with a start and realized it was daybreak. I knew something had wakened me and the next instant I knew what. The Bulambo were singing, and I recognized their song. It was the one Jimmy had made me know—the one they sang of a morning when one of their people die—the accompaniment they supplied when a spirit walked the last time down the Crocodile trail. . ."

The Bank Manager gave a snorting, uneasy laugh. "I've never moved so quickly in my life. Didn't even put on slippers. Just pelted down the stairs and out to the vault and jerked the door open." He turned, came back and leaned his hands on the table. "They'd got him." He drew in his breath.

"He was half standing, half sitting, leaned back

against a pile of boxes. The hammer was gripped in his hand as if he'd fought with it. His dead face was gray, contorted with appalling horror. His eyes were starting, his lips snarled back over his teeth. He'd seen ghosts, I tell you—shapes that had devoured his mind with the tearing, savage fury of lion's claws in meat. I'll never forget so long as I may live. . . A human sacrifice, to nameless, fearful things . . . poor Jimmy."

"So you do believe in it?" I hesitated. "There was no other explanation?"

He sprawled into his chair. "Not altogether . . . perhaps. And there was an explanation . . . of a sort.

"We found it when we lifted him. The tail of his overcoat was nailed to a currency box. He'd been sitting on the box nailing on the lid and in the dark had hammered down his coat. When he tried to move he was jerked back. He struggled but something in the blackness held him fast and yanked him down. An invisible hand. His heart stopped." The Bank Manager's voice dropped almost to a whisper. "But how, in heaven's name, can the witchmen seem to *know?*"

"What did the girl say?" I asked.

"She?" The Bank Manager hesitated. "She said what you did. 'Funk.' I don't know. Possibly you're right. I've been here eleven years, I tell you. *I* don't know. Not any more." He got up.

"Let's turn in."

GOING into the bush" in Liberia is not complicated, for the jungle crowds close on the seaboard towns. A launch goes up the river every morning to a village called Brewersville and beyond Brewersville—five yards beyond —the forest begins.

I was up before daylight and when the boxes were packed went out on the shadowy streets to conscript casual loiterers to carry them to Waterside. The motor boat was already nearly filled. Passengers, nondescript and irritable, sat along the sides, and the space between was piled high with bundles. The loads stowed, I took a place in the stern. But only for a moment.

The launch Captain gesticulated excitedly.

"Massa no sit for there! No sah! No sah!"

I gathered the space was reserved and moved stumblingly forward, wedging between two dusty, barefoot native men. Time passed and the stir of embarkation subsided. Still we waited. At last a big middle-aged negro, accompanied by a

young man in native costume, stepped from the wharf and they settled themselves in the stern. The Captain poled off, the wheezing engine turned and the boat nosed slowly up-river.

The launch was broad of beam, flat-bottomed and smelled of oil, bilge, palm-kernels and human sweat. The warm mists still lay in the mangroves. Sleepily we surveyed each other, settling with stolid patience to the long discomfort of the morning.

Pressed together, thigh to thigh, the passengers formed a continuous oval. All available space amidship was filled with the litter of baggage—burlap bags, tin trunks and great bunches of green plaintains. Faces, individualities were amorphous, vague in the shadow cast by the tarpaulin covering. Sometimes the rising sun caught the ripples of the wake and a fluttering reflection of the golden light would touch brown cheeks and parted, heavy lips.

In the congested boat, however, the big man in the stern had ample room. Those near him, awed, had drawn apart a little. I judged him a man of perhaps fifty. He was a very black negro, in a blue serge suit and a white sun helmet. His legs were crossed and he leaned back. One hand trailed in the water, the other rested on his left knee. It was a notable hand, powerful and well-formed. The fingers were thicker, more forceful than those of a negro commonly are. He looked upon the world through half-closed, slightly puffy lids. In them, in the line of the thick mouth, in his whole manner there was a suggestion of contempt, the heavy ease of authority.

Once the look changed.

His companion was a dark-skinned youth in his early twenties. He was obviously ill. The white Arab robe he wore was gathered in as if against the cold, his face curiously blank, the lips drawn. He stirred a little and the older man was instantly attentive.

His expression, his position became laden with gentleness. He leaned forward but the young man had said nothing, wanted nothing. The big hands hovered helplessly, touched the robe, rearranged a pillow.

A soiled young black was oiling the engine. "Who's that?" I asked.

"That," said the engineer gravely, "is Mister George Charles Karnga. He D.C. for this country. He be big man. People for this country fear him," he hesitated, then added the great West African superlative, "plenty too much!"

At the Brewersville wharf, a spindly, shaky thing over a stretch of odorous swamp, I learned that the town is not at the riverside, but several miles inland. Two Ford trucks, however, were waiting.

We had been quiet, drowsily, tropically quiet, for five hours, but as the launch touched there was a burst of frenzied activity. There were no loiterers here, so sacks and boxes had to be moved by their respective owners, dragged from the floor, heaved overside and carried, amid much bumping and petulance, to the road.

Through it all, however, Mr. Karnga and the young man with him did not stir. They were wait-

ing, evidently, for the rabble to get away. This calm became intelligible when the chauffeur of one of the cars furiously defended it. It was reserved for Mr. Karnga. The rest of us—thirteen in all—and all our baggage, mounted the other, clung to the running board, to the hood, to the roof, to each other, crushed, jostling and hot. After a few moments the truck moved slowly off.

I looked back to see Mr. Karnga, the young man on his arm, walk up the wharf to the waiting car. He did not glance in our direction.

Four times the overloaded jitney came to a gasping halt and all the passengers got down to push. Soon the other car sped by.

Karnga was waiting by the roadside when finally we arrived. As we got down he lifted his helmet and extended his hand.

"You are Mr. Vandercook," he said. "I had been warned that you were coming. I am sorry there was no room for you in my auto, but my son is an invalid." He paused and I said I understood. He continued. "It seems there is a slight difficulty. There is only one empty hut. But if it will not inconvenience you, I will occupy one of the two rooms and you the other. You are going upcountry tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"How many carriers will you require?"

"Five."

Mr. Karnga snapped his fingers. Several men ran toward us. He did not look at them as he gave his order.

"Five carriers for this white man and twenty for myself. Tomorrow morning at four o'clock."

The men mumbled affirmatively as the Commissioner conducted me to a dilapidated thatched hut. I looked for my boxes, to find that they were being carried by my fellow passengers, men and women. Till this moment they had been oblivious of my existence. But they had seen me shake hands with Mr. Karnga.

With experience of the difficulty of finding baggage porters in the interior, I asked if it was quite sure that the requisite number would appear.

George Charles Karnga nodded.

* * *

The rest-house at Brewersville had a small verandah and there I later in the afternoon rejoined my host. He was seated in a canvas camp chair smoking a cigar. The helmet, now that the sun was low, had been put aside. He waved me to a seat. We exchanged autobiographies.

He was a full-blooded Kongbah, he said, eldest son of the former supreme chief of that tribe and district, a region, he added proudly, fourteen days' walk in circumference. At the time of Karnga's birth there had been war between the Kongbah people and the Liberian settlers on the coast and in token of peace the old chieftain had given his son as voluntary hostage to the Liberians to educate. They had done that work well. Mr. Karnga's English was faultless, his choice of phrase and reference precise.

"A boy of intelligence," he explained, "can get

a sound education at the mission schools. Though much time is wasted with religion."

Then the record blurred a little. Somehow he had risen, for the post of District Commissioner is one of the highest in the Republic's gift. It meant he commanded an immense territory of jungle, was supreme overlord of all the native inhabitants and, more immediately, was just now in charge of the construction of the first road ever to cut through the Liberian hinterland. This project, I knew, had aroused a tempest of complaint and criticism.

"Our country," explained Karnga, "is not in a position to pay for labor. Why, indeed, should we, in this instance? The road is to be for the natives so let them build it. . . And I require them to supply their own tools and food. . . The African is accustomed to firmness. I rarely have any trouble, perhaps because it is in my blood to rule. The work of civilization must be done, no matter how painful it may seem." He laughed shortly. "On occasion I have found that a whip has great civilizing influence."

"You believe, then, in civilization?" I asked.

"Certainly."

Without warning a brass band began to blare. I jumped, but Mr. Karnga showed no surprise. In a moment six men, much and rather pitifully dressed up in shabby European clothes rounded the corner of the house, blowing lustily on battered instruments. They lined up before us and played to the end of the tune, the Liberian national anthem.

When they had finished the leader stepped forward, hat in one hand, bassoon in the other.

"The Brewersville Bras' Ban' and Young People's Social Club," he announced, "takes extreme pleasure in welcomin' to its midst our esteemed fellow-citizen and District Co-missioner, the Right Honorable George Charles Karnga." He hesitated, mumbled to a full stop.

Karnga, his eyes on the ground—not once had he raised them nor given any indication he was aware of the musicians' presence—reached into his pocket and drew out a handful of change. He moved his head and a servant appeared at his elbow. The servant took the money and distributed it among the bandsmen. As they retired in abashed silence, their murmured thanks inaudible, the District Commissioner went on:

"Of course, there is much to be done. The work of civilization will necessarily be slow. But come it must. In hygiene, in education, in commerce, in improved methods of agriculture, there are already signs of advance. It is our sacred trust, our supreme duty to the backward peoples. . . ."

* * *

At bedtime I stepped out to see the moon. It was just setting, a close yellow crescent that loomed eerily above the black mass of the jungle. By its faint light I saw Karnga. The night was vibrant with the shrill, high rhythms of the insects and he did not hear me. He was standing at the edge of the clearing facing the wall of the forest. I watched. His hands lifted slowly till his arms were high above his head. The fingers were stretched upward, suppliant. They moved with groping yearning as

if to feel out some shape and comfort from the night. . . So at other times had I seen men of the far woods approach familiar gods on nights when the moon was new. . . .

* * *

In the morning the young man of the launch reappeared. He had been put to bed immediately on arrival in the room which adjoined mine. The white mists were just lifting, so one could not see clearly. But from dark shapes in the half-gloom it was evident that Karnga's caravan was ready to depart. Men stood by their loads ready to lift them to their heads. The District Commissioner, bent with precaution, was helping his son into a roofed hammock litter borne by four men. As he finished he leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. At a brusque order the long line of porters heaved up their loads, the procession moved forward, and in a moment dissolved into the denser mist of the forest. Karnga came toward me. The imperious manner of yesterday was gone. His hands were tremulous.

"I am making an early start. My boy is ill so we cannot go quickly. You will probably catch up with us. Good morning." Turning, he trotted nervously after the caravan; in a moment, like it, had vanished.

The sun rose, climbed quickly up, the mists lifted and the day began, a day of throbbing, scorching heat. By nine the sky was cloudless, a dome of azure flame. Where the trail ran through thick woods the air steamed like a bath. Even the tough-

footed porters were forced to run over the baked ground of the clearings. Over everything pressed that almost tangible quiet of tropic midday. It was eleven o'clock before we caught up with the first straggler from the Karnga party.

A little, thin old negro stood in the path, a black tin trunk marked G.C.K. on the ground beside him. As I approached he turned his face beseechingly. The naked brown body ran with sweat, his eyes were protuberant with exhaustion. He indicated by gestures that I should help him up with his load.

African porters often have endurance to carry weights which they lack the strength to lift, so the request was not uncommon. I took hold of the box and pulled. I could scarcely get it from the ground. I looked in astonishment from it to the frail old man. He nodded sadly.

My boy came up and together we succeeded in getting the trunk into place on the carrier's head. He staggered, seemed about to fall, then ran forward with halting, limping steps. Karnga's box weighed not less than 125 pounds. And throughout Africa the legal limit is sixty.

Five miles farther on we came to a group of round mud huts in a clearing, the noon resting-place.

Karnga and his men were before us, the carriers lying by their loads in the shade of a mango tree. The Commissioner and his son sat in chairs on the narrow earthen verandah of the town chief's house.

Karnga waited for us to make ourselves comfortable in the village kitchen, a roofed, wall-less structure always placed at the disposal of travelers. Then he came out. He was scarcely recognizable. The blue serge suit, an incredible costume for the bush, was drenched and limp with perspiration, the trousers were caked to the knees in mud, the shoes soggy with water. His shirt was open at the neck, showing the corded muscles of his black throat.

He laughed uneasily. "I am not a good walker," he explained. "I am always carried, of course. But my son had to have my hammock and I stayed beside him." He indicated his feet. "I three times had to carry him myself through the creeks. The pole bridges are too uncertain and my men are not to be trusted. . . I go on at once, you know. You will follow the same path but I shall be ahead of you."

I said I was sorry, but he went on, not looking at me.

"There is a great doctor, a native, who lives in a town three days to the north. I am taking my son to him."

"A witch doctor?" I asked.

"I suppose that is what you would call him . . . He is an old man, very famous. Perhaps . . . perhaps . . ." Karnga faltered, came to an embarrassed halt and looked at me. The big hands lifted timorously. "This illness, my son . . . I cannot understand. No one can understand. I have taken him to the English doctor, to every white doctor in Monrovia, but they have done nothing, they can

say nothing." Karnga beat his palms softly together. "Perhaps, sir," (the address, coming from Karnga, made me start) "you could look at him? If it would not be too much trouble?"

"I am not a doctor," I protested.

Karnga nodded. "I know. I know. But perhaps . . . He is my son, you know." He drew himself up. "The next in line, through me, of the Kongbah kings. With the new times he will never rule . . . but he is my son. If you could, please?"

I rose. "Of course. I warn you, though, I know nothing whatever."

"You are a white man," said District Commissioner Karnga.

* * *

He explained as we walked across the clearing. His son for the past several weeks had been in a condition of increasing coma. There had been no known accident but the lethargy I had noted in the boat had appeared and grown steadily worse. The young man now, said Karnga, found difficulty in speaking, ate little and slept much. His mind, though clear, was inactive and inattentive. It was evident he was slowly dying.

We reached the verandah. The young negro sat in a straight chair, his hands in his lap, his head slightly bent, his eyes distant.

Karnga leaned over him and spoke in his native tongue. When he had finished the boy looked at me and made the least suggestion of a bow. His manner was that of a hypnotic.

Feeling vastly ignorant, I did all I could, while Karnga watched, his eyes hungry, wistful with hope. The big man in his muddy European suit was queerly touching. For the passing instant he utterly relied on me. I, a white, stood for the new, strange times.

I felt the boy's pulse. A trifle slow, but not otherwise exceptional. Tongue healthy. Eyes normal enough. Then I examined his head. Nowhere was there the slightest scratch, nowhere any depression or any sensitive area. I stepped back, the farce finished.

"I haven't the remotest notion what's the matter," I said. "I told you I wouldn't have. I'm sorry."

Karnga had listened to the verdict with his lips parted. When I finished he slowly straightened up, his lips stiffened again into the look of heavy, contemptuous power. The thick lids gathered on the heavy eyes.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you."

Civilization, I realized, at its last outpost and in its last representative, had failed. Now he must grope back into the past.

"Possibly," said Karnga, "we may have good fortune upcountry. He is a great doctor, that old man, they say."

Half an hour later the caravan reformed. Karnga, walking beside the litter, went first, the young man's hand in his. The old man with the heavy box came last. In a moment they were swallowed up by the devouring woods.

My cook, a town boy and a product of the mission schools, hands in pockets and a cigarette between his lips, stood staring after them, his weak mouth twisted. He saw me watching him and spat on the ground.

"Bushman!" he said.

I understood. The townsman of the new Africa despises the native. For anything old, once held familiar, the contempt he feels is unutterable and deep. District Commissioner Karnga had gone to see a witchman.

We reached Gbyma at noon of the fourth day and I had hung my hammock and lunched before I came upon him. Karnga sat, the now streaked and muddy helmet on his head and a cigar held rigid between his teeth, in his camp chair on the verandah of the headman's hut. He had discarded the blue suit and wore a long, striped Mandingo robe, the costume of a jungle chief. He received me with measured cordiality and instructed a servant to bring a chair.

An awkard moment passed.

"What success have you had?" I said at length.

With startling petulance Karnga flung his cigar across the dry earth clearing.

"None! . . . since you are"—he bowed—"kind enough to be interested. The old man I came to see . . . he was not here when I arrived. But," the big jaw hardened, "I have sent into the bush for him and he should be brought here today."

"Had you notified him you were coming?"

Karnga smiled. "That is not necessary in my

country. All that passes in the forest my people know. The Kongbah have their drums and the old men"—he touched his forehead—"can talk together in the dark." His voice had fallen to a softer, weirder note, the precise English seemed to lilt and thicken. "He expected me, right enough, but he was not here."

Suddenly he struck one great fist into his open palm. "Great God, have these swine forgotten that I am their king . . . that"—he amended quickly—"if I had chosen I would have been their king? That I am Commissioner of the district?" He shook his head in puzzlement. "I do not understand why he is not here. . . My son is failing rapidly. . . I have been unable to make him accept any food at all today. Although his eyes are open he seems to sleep."

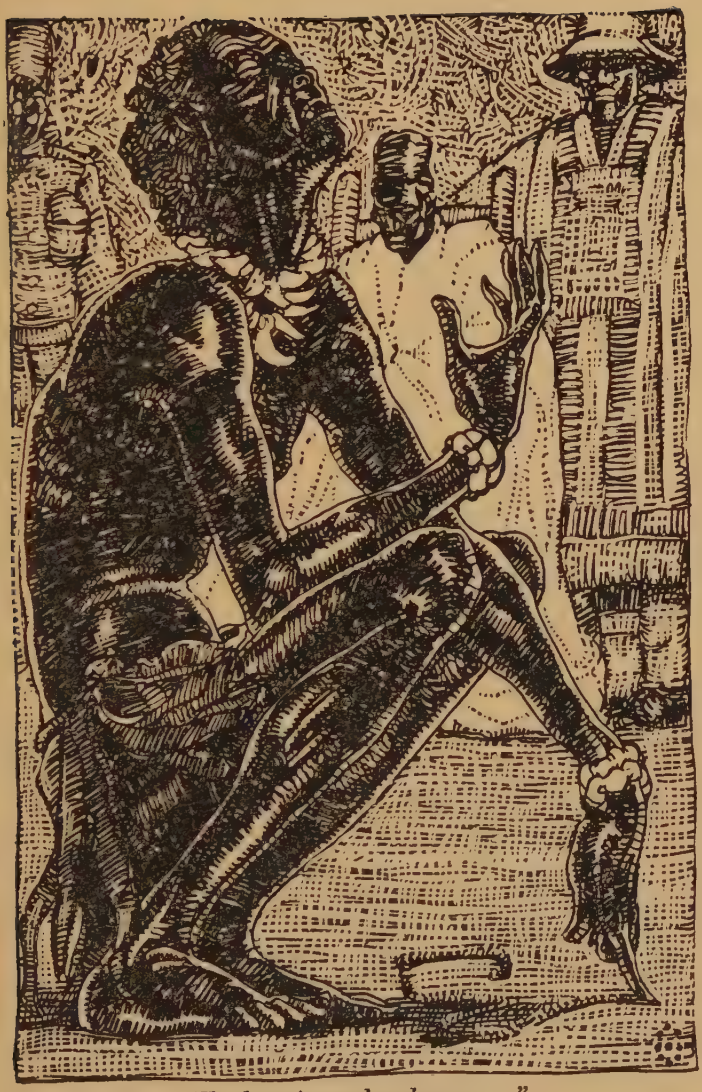
"I am so sorry I could do nothing," I said.

Karnga did not reply.

* * *

At dusk a disturbance in the village square made me look out. Two of Karnga's men, tall fellows in khaki coats, walked with an old native man between them. One held him by the shoulder. It was the witchman. He wore a girdle of dark cloth and a string of rattling leopards' teeth hung about his neck. A rabble of gesticulating natives followed at a little distance.

Karnga ran forward to greet him. His manner was hurried, frightened, almost cringing. He dismissed the witchman's escort and conducted him into the hut.



"He drew in sand and sang . . ."

The quick twilight ended and the strange, shy voices of the woods took up their swelling chorus. No one danced or sang in Gbyma town for that night a lantern burned in Commissioner Karnga's hut and laid a fragile path of yellow light along the ground outside. One by one the bamboo mats were affixed to the little doors and at last no one was left abroad.

I had been asleep when his voice roused me.

"Sir! Sir!"

The slender moon was up and the deserted town was ghostly in its slanting light.

Karnga, hatless, a stolid, powerful figure in his flowing robe, was at the door.

"I am glad you are awake," he said. "Since you have been so kind as to be interested . . . I must talk to some one of my own kind . . . I . . . I do not understand."

I sat on the dirt steps of a nearby hut and he took a place beside me. His knees spread, he laid his big hands helplessly in the lap of his robe and looked straight before him. I noticed he was barefoot. In that time and place and in that guise it was easy to believe his word that he was king. Only the big man's steady words linked us at all with the Coast and the new world outside.

"You've had your interview, I suppose?" I suggested.

"Yes. He was afraid, I tell you, that old man. But I forced him to tell me the truth. . . He . . . He drew in sand and sang . . ."

"What did he say?"

"That my son, that my boy . . . my boy is dying. That they have poisoned him. He says there is nothing that can be done to help him. He tells me the poison is one that only the Kongbah people know and use . . ."

Karnga covered his face with his hands. "Do you see, sir, my people have killed my boy . . . my boy who was born to be their king! In my grandfather's and in my father's time the Kongbah loved their kings. . ." He stopped and looked at me accusingly. "And the white doctors in Monrovia said that there was nothing they could do. I was taught," said Karnga earnestly, "that white men know everything. . .

"Why do you suppose they hate me so? I have been hard on them on the road work, perhaps. But the roads are for them, they must be driven. The work . . ."—Karnga's voice unconsciously lost fullness and he spoke as if by rote—"the work of civilization must be done. . ."

After a long pause he turned to me.

"Have you anything to suggest?"

"Nothing. I am sorry."

He rose and extended his hand. The moonlight shone on his face and showed a mask of torture, of doubt and of unutterable pain.

"Thank you for your company. Back here in the interior a man so seldom has an opportunity for intelligent conversation."

"May I ask what you intend to do, Mr. Karnga?"

"Do? Do?" he repeated. "My boy will die and there will not be much to do. But," his mouth

twisted, "I can at least show these natives that I am Commissioner."

"Good night."

* * *

My boy wakened me before daybreak and nervously announced that the five carriers were outside and must speak to me at once.

They were waiting, insubstantial shapes knee-deep in the rolling mist that lay in the somber green-gray town. The cook was with them and acted as interpreter. His habitual nonchalance was worn uneasily. Several of the porters began to speak at once in hurried undertones but the cook nodded peevishly and stopped them.

"These bushmen, marster," he whispered, "say we got to go from this place now one time! They say they fear too much. Plenty trouble goin' to live for here. They say we go. If you no be ready they say they run for high bush. Plenty trouble!"

I argued briefly and ineffectively. The porters were frightened and quite ready to desert. Besides, I thought I understood. Moods travel in the African dark, rumors spread like a contagion.

The men uploaded at sunrise. I walked over to Karnga's house to say good-by. He came down from the verandah. His son, I noticed, sat in his chair under the eaves, but this morning his head hung forward and his eyes were closed.

Karnga wore the khaki uniform of an officer of the Liberian Frontier Force. His leather puttees were polished and his helmet newly pipe-clayed.

He carried something in his left hand which he kept behind him so I could not see.

Karnga spoke first. "Good-by. I had heard you were going. I hope your trip is enjoyable and that you will carry back to America good reports of our little country."

"Your son . . . how is he today?" I asked.

For a moment Karnga's lips weakened childishly. "They believe that he will die this morning. His pulse and breathing are already very slow. At least, thank God, it is without pain."

We shook hands.

The cook was waiting with the porters at the edge of the clearing where the trail began. He nodded to where Karnga stood.

"He be big man," said the cook. "He be king for this country. Small boy, he be king too, but king no count for this time. That palaver done finish. Liberia be civilize now, like white man country. Come, marster . . ."

I looked back once more and then I saw that what Karnga held was a short whip with a long cutting lash. He had brought his hand from behind his back and surveyed the town, wide shoulders squared and feet apart. He flexed his wrist experimentally and the lash cracked dryly once. A second time he did it, but the second gesture had lost meaning and the lash trailed aimless on the ground. He raised it and with an air of hopeless idleness rolled it up and put it in his pocket. We entered the gloomy shadows of the trail and soon Gbyma town, brown and green in the early sun, was left behind.

His boy . . . his boy was dead and there was not much to do. . .

There would not be "plenty trouble." Both sides had failed him and left him idly standing in the golden morning all alone. . .

THE NO-GOOD COASTER

A FAINT tinkle of ice against glass came from the darkness around the corner of the verandah where Reynolds' boy was busy preparing the vermouths. The pad of naked feet and the faint creak of occasional rickshaws filtered up from below. Hard flies pit-pitted themselves to disaster against the blazing white gasoline lantern that hung motionless in the still air at the far end of the porch.

Reynolds had left me for a moment. I had hung my helmet and white coat beside his on the wall and slumped into the depth of a battered wicker armchair. I welcomed the slight physical tension produced by its lack of a foreleg. It helped keep one awake.

Conakry, I decided, was charming, by far the most agreeable place I'd encountered in a fortnight of slow progress down the Coast.

I said as much when my host—with attendant vermouths—reappeared. He smiled feebly.

"Yes, the man who laid this place out knew what he was about. He was a doctor. You don't see a mosquito once a month. It's a grand place. I hate it like hell."

"What's the matter?"

Reynolds, deeply absorbed in pouring a drink, didn't reply for a moment.

"I don't know. Listen!" He tossed his head, a rather heavy, young, good-looking head, in the general direction of the street. The low-pitched singsong of two natives in leisurely altercation on the road below had added itself to the collection of subdued noises. Nothing else.

He went on. "That's it. Not a darned thing. If I wasn't a good Coaster I'd have gone mad a year ago. Africa's a big continent. Perhaps they told you that in school; but nobody who hasn't lived down here has any idea just how big it is." His gray eyes stared at me curiously. "At night this whole hot world seems to twist up toward the moon and then grow big soft sweaty hands that reach for your throat. . . That's not my own. Peachy, a friend of mine, made that up. In a place like Conakry where there aren't but four people who talk English you give up trying to say something new every time, you know. . . Peachy used to say he was afraid of the dark. You haven't been out long enough to know what he meant." Reynolds shook his head jerkily and grinned across the table. "The white man's grave is right. Have some white man's gravy." He shoved a monstrously tall glass toward me.

He turned his head to wipe a drop of perspira-

tion from his chin onto his shirt collar and grinned again. "French Guinea has some nice things about it, though. Have you noticed no one's heard the news down here that the franc isn't so good any more? I get a hundred and fifty Canadian gold dollars a week and pay my house boy fifteen shillings a month. That's how Africa's got me. I can't quit! When I'm up at the mines it's not bad. I won't let the office send out another engineer for that end of things. . . Africa does get you one way or another, it's funny. You come to lick Africa, and it doesn't even seem to know you're here. Good Coasters don't give a damn. It doesn't bother me, but sometimes there's a fellow like Peachy and it does him in plenty."

"Who's Peachy? And what the deuce is a Coaster?"

Reynolds hoisted himself out of the chair and slopped a new supply of vermouth into my glass. "This is a good drink for any time—unless you want something else? You're new to all tropics, aren't you? If you weren't you'd know what a Coaster is. Every white colonial from Hobart to Delhi knows there's only one Coast—West Africa from Senegal to Congo. A Coaster is just a white who is or has been damn fool enough to live out here for a while. We all know one another, every white man in every port. But we don't like one another very much." He paused reflectively. "And who was Peachy? Nobody. Just a no-good Coaster."

He stopped once more, staring intently into his glass, shaking it in a spiral so the ice tinkled. "You know, it's a great occasion for me to have some one

new to talk to. Not you especially. Matter of fact, when I first saw you down at the hotel I thought you were just a damn missionary, but I wanted to talk to you anyway. Now when I get started I don't really seem to want to—not about anything serious, Peachy for instance. A good Coaster learns to think about nothing but the job and the next drink. . . Come in!"

My chair dipped dangerously. Reynolds' sudden shout had startled me into forgetfulness of the wounded foreleg. He laughed delightedly. "Some one knocked downstairs. I can hear a mouse sneeze at fifty yards." He tipped back and craned his neck to look around the corner of the porch. "Hello, Mamada. You come round here, huh? What you want?"

A tall old black man in green fez and long, well-worn blue and white Sudan robe appeared noiselessly out of the shadows and made us a slow bow.

"Afternoon, Mister Reynolds, sir. And you, sir." His voice quavered and was very low. Reynolds, with a look of curious respect, leaned forward to hear better. "I do not like to trouble you, sir. But—" the negro's long, tapering brown fingers toyed at his grizzled goatee and he eyed me doubtfully. "But, sir, I am very hungry. Perhaps, sir, you could . . ." he leaned forward so I shouldn't hear and whispered, quite audibly, "give me fifty centimes?"

Reynolds jerked his head up reassuringly. "What you do, Mamada, if I give you five franc, huh?" he asked.

The old man stood erect and inclined his head

"When black man and white man fight, black man must fight to kill."

slightly. "You would make me very happy, sir. I should be grateful, sir. My sons have all left me and it is sometimes hard." The English came slowly, with a soft mingling of African and French accents that added peculiar emphasis.

Reynolds looked at him with a puzzled expression which twisted the corners of his eyes—corners already wrinkled by the glare of the sun. "Mamada," he said suddenly, rather harshly, "why you always talk so with me? You no used to talk to Mr. Peachy like that. *Pourquoi tant de cérémonie*, huh? You know me, Mamada. You think you better than me?"

Mamada relaxed from his erect pose and spread his long hands deprecatingly; smiled quietly, revealing white little teeth between his crackled, narrow lips. He shook his head. "No, sir, I not think so. But you my master, sir. Mis' Peachy wer' my friend. I loved him, sir. All Fulah people in Conakry love him, sir. Even no-good Landuman and Timini people, they love him too." The old man halted the flow of soft syllables and, astonishingly, his eyes filled with tears. "Except maybe one, sir. But maybe he love him too . . . maybe he love him most of all." For an instant he stared past us out of the ring of light into the dark beyond.

Reynolds ended the pause abruptly. "Would you have done it, Mamada?" he asked.

The old man looked down upon him and did not reply at once. "He not ask me, sir. He too proud, even in that time, to come to friend. But, sir, when black man and white man fight, black man must fight to kill. It is best black man take beating and

do nothing. When black man fight back, white man afraid and go crazy—so black man must help himself with knife. That one man, sir, know what Mis' Peachy want. . . White men are not brave in this country."

Reynolds, his eyes still upon the old man's face, fumbled in his pocket for a moment and then put some tightly rolled notes in the negro's hand, closing the brown fingers over them. "You go eat now, Mamada. When you get hungry come to me, see?"

Mamada lifted his fez and made us a short bow. I found myself automatically rising half out of my chair, returning it. "Thank you, sir," he said, gathered his robes about him, turned, and swept with haunting majesty into the dark around the turn of the porch.

"He used to be night watchman at our warehouse before we sent our machinery up into the bush," Reynolds explained. "He makes one feel devilish young, doesn't he? His ancestors were chiefs back in the Fouta Dialon when ours still had long hair on their arms. You better have another drink. No?"

Reynolds looked at me quizzically.

"I suppose you couldn't make much sense out of what he was saying, about the fighting and what Peachy wanted and all, could you? I'll tell you how it was."

He took a long swallow and then began to talk.

"Peachy was a Canadian. He came out to the Coast just after the War. He was engaged to a girl,

but they decided they could wait until he was fixed here and then she was to come out and join him.

"Peachy's job was to go back in the hills behind here—the Fouta Dialon—examine some gold claims another man had located and, if they looked good, he had instructions to arrange everything—concessions, getting machinery, hiring labor, and establishing communications with the coast. He was in town first and then went back into the bush and was up there without seeing a white man for a year; but the climate in the hills is very decent, so he kept healthy, and the native trade caravans kept him in supplies and got his mail to him pretty regularly. Letters from Dorothy—she was the girl in Canada—used to arrive a bale at a time, and he'd send his back with every native who passed by his place on the way to the coast. He was making a hundred a week and banking about ninety of it. It was arranged that she was to come out as soon as he could make his headquarters here in Conakry."

Reynolds stared for a moment over the high balustrade into the soft darkness that rimmed close around the circle of light from the lantern.

"But something was happening to Peachy. He didn't know it at the time, but it was. When I say he loved Africa, you won't understand what I mean. But that was just it. Every white man who comes here, you see, has been filled up all his life with the notion that he, as a white man, is just about the greatest thing in the world. We're taught that niggers are just poor devils our God stopped worrying about when he'd only half done with

them. We know that America or Canada or England or wherever it is we come from is the only important place on earth. That's all right. I believe it. I'm a good Coaster and I hate Africa. But Peachy didn't believe it hard enough. Back at the mines he lived with niggers like old Mamada—wise old black Mohammedans who know how great and just how unimportant Allah is—how unimportant everything is except the sun, the sand, the forest, and the moon. He learned their language, went about as deep as an outsider can go into their customs and magic and all. He went so far he realized he could never go farther, never, just because he was white, go really to the source of things and find out what's behind those strange quiet eyes of theirs. Often when he was out prospecting he'd sleep somewhere in the hills and listen alone by his fire to the queer whisperings of the night and try to understand what it was saying too. But he never learned the key of that at all. It was so old it had forgotten him.

"At first he was angry. He'd never encountered anything before in his life he couldn't understand. No white man does who stays at home. That's why we think so highly of ourselves. But Africa was one too many for him.

"All this showed itself in a peculiar way. I didn't know until just last summer when I met Dorothy when I was home on leave. She told me. She said that about this time—it was the beginning of his second year on the coast—he began in his letters to say a lot about how he wasn't good enough for her. Of course, she didn't think much of it at first.

I suppose they'd been telling and writing each other ever since they first fell in love how he wasn't good enough for her and she wasn't good enough for him, and all that. I used to be that way myself. . . It wasn't just a pretty phrase with Peachy, though. He meant it. The two big things in his life were Africa and that girl—a funny combination—and Africa was telling him with every silence, with every whack of the sun on the back of his head that he wasn't as big as it was. And the more he realized it the more he loved Africa —and the more he thought about that girl and loved her, the surer he was that he wasn't good enough, big enough, that is, for her either.

"You can imagine what happens to a fellow when a girl and a continent get all mixed up in his head. He wasn't proud any more. And that's the devil of a thing to happen to a Coaster. It was just that Africa grew so big in the front of his mind that all the strength and decision he had went into the effort to understand Africa and to adjust his littleness to its bigness. His love for Dorothy didn't die—didn't even dim—but it changed. It became abstract, secondary in its place in his emotions, secondary to the emotion of wonder and awe and strangeness that this queer world of jungle and sky and sun bred in him.

"Not long after this I came out. Peachy had got everything in the bush up to the point where he was ready really to start mining and he'd written home to the office asking that some one be sent out who could take charge of the work there while he stayed down here and ran the business end of

things. It was partly true that he did need another man, but it was mostly fake. He didn't like Conakry and he did like the bush; so he'd figured it out in his muddled head that if he quit the bush he'd maybe be able to think straight again.

"It sounds silly, but I think Africa made him feel somehow unfaithful. He'd catch himself thinking about Africa—trying to make the place and the people and its vastness all fit into a customary pattern like our lives at home. Then he'd suddenly realize he should have been thinking of Dorothy all this time and he'd feel badly that he'd forgotten her. He took this house here—the darned place has sixteen rooms. He was all ready for her. There was no reason on God's earth why he couldn't cable her to take the next boat. But he didn't. Then he started drinking." Reynolds lifted his glass with a quick smile, toasted me in pantomime, and emptied it.

"I don't know you very well. You may be brighter than most, but I'll wager you've never thought about one thing steadily for more than two minutes in your life. I know I never have. Very few white men have. That's why Peachy drank too much—he felt he simply had to think—think about his girl and himself and Africa and what, exactly, was the matter with the lot of them and naturally, he found his mind began to wander off on other things before he'd put in more than three consecutive minutes at it. Anyone's will. But Peachy didn't realize that. He just took it as another proof that something was wrong with him. He felt *little*—so damned little he couldn't even

face this simple business of writing a letter to his girl and telling her to come on out here to him.

"So he'd have a drink on it. He found that after he'd had seven or eight he got into that half-sleepy state where one idea at a time is plenty. Of course, when he got like that he really wasn't thinking about anything, but he thought he was thinking about himself and her and the Coast and it made him feel some of his old courage had come back to him—at least he felt so at the time. Next morning he'd realize he was a sneak."

The boy appeared in the circle of light and put some dirty glasses on a tray. Reynolds stared vaguely at him until he went into the dark. Then he continued.

"He wrote to Dorothy less and less. She was getting impatient. She loved him and she was frightened. She did the worst thing she could have done. She asked him questions, 'Why don't you send for me?' 'What is the matter?'—that sort of thing, and they scared Peachy. He'd walk around town for a couple of days after a letter like that with an old helmet on the back of his head and his hands way down in some white drill pants that needed washing, looking like he was going to die. Peachy was tall with not much meat on him. He wore a little mustache that didn't seem to belong to him and he had blue eyes like a girl's. A pretty boy, really. But after one of those letters he'd look like he was sick at his stomach. He'd frame one answer after another, sitting down at the hotel with a bottle on the table, and tear them all up,

and after about a pint of liquor sometimes he'd cry. Because there wasn't any reason for anything."

Reynolds opened his hand toward me with a jerk and leaned across the table. "Don't you see? No man wants a girl he loves to give herself to him if he honestly doesn't think he's good enough for her. He felt—what d'y'call it?—inferior. He couldn't make sense out of anything. . . This was the sort of thing. He told me that once up in the bush a young black woman's baby died while he was staying in a native town—the usual little cluster of round clay huts with pointed roofs hidden away in a clearing in the middle of the jungle. He knew the mother, she had washed his clothes and cooked for him before the child came. She'd never had any children although she was nearly thirty and she wanted one. She couldn't think or talk about anything else, and when it was born and turned out to be a boy she was the happiest woman Peachy'd ever seen—laughing, singing all the time, as proud as if that kid was the only one of its kind in Africa. Then one night when it was about three weeks old it died. Peachy said he thought the woman would lose her mind. She cried for three days and nights without stopping—and she lived in a hut just four yards from the one where Peachy was trying to sleep—which naturally didn't do his nerves any good. But on the third morning she came out of her hut with the dead baby in her arms and laid it on the ground just in front of the door. It was naked and weazened and brown. She wasn't crying now, though Peachy said her lids were swollen so she could

hardly see. She grabbed a white rooster that was pecking around at her feet and, before Peachy knew what was happening, she twisted its head off and let the blood drip down on the body of her baby. Then, very slowly, she stepped over the body into her house, then out again, and then in—three times. She was perfectly calm and after a minute she called to her brother and he took the baby away and buried it. An hour later Peachy saw her pounding coffee in a mortar with the other women of the village as if nothing had happened.

"That apparently silly little bit of flimflam—I can't explain it, it's a very old native custom, a kind of sacrifice and sending back of the dead into eternity—had cured the most terrific and genuine sorrow of that black woman's life.

"But it didn't help Peachy a bit. He couldn't get it at all. He thought and thought and asked questions and finally got to feel that he just wasn't anything at all. He, a white man, couldn't straighten out his own trouble—a fairly simple question of whether a fellow that isn't man enough to understand the mood of a continent can still be man enough to deserve a girl—it sounds absolutely senseless when you put it like that, doesn't it?—and here this half-naked black mother, just because she belonged and knew old important things he couldn't know—had mended her life with a rooster's blood and three steps over a clay doorstep in a sun-baked nigger town.

"I was making only short trips back to the mines then and would come back to Conakry as soon as I could. I liked Peachy. I was a good Coaster from

the start, and he sort of leaned on me. He was two years younger than I and different entirely, but we got on fine. I'd buck him up and try to get him to write something—anything—right away. A few times I wrote letters for him, and he'd sit down at this table here as tame as a whipped child and copy them out and just hand them to me to mail without saying anything but 'thank you.' Then he'd get up and put on an old overcoat—a crazy thing to have brought out here with him; but it does get pretty chilly after dark sometimes—and walk around in the native quarter 'most all night. Once or twice I got worried about him and couldn't sleep and I'd go out to find him. He'd always be in the same place—over in the other end of town, sitting by himself in the shadows beyond the light of a little fire in front of a mud hut, his chin in his hands and his eyes so wide and still they'd scare me. There's not another white man in Conakry who'd have the nerve to go in that part of the city at night. But the blacks, like old Mamada said, understood him. He'd just sit there listening to their soft murmuring talk that makes one feel it's the same conversation that began back when the world was born and won't be done forever. And when they'd bring out a drum and dance and sing he'd stiffen and watch and listen harder still, trying hard, so hard his poor half-drunk head must have ached, to make sense out of the thing. He thought, I imagine, that if he could just understand the drums, find even one thing he could get his hands on so it wouldn't slip away, he would be all right.

"He didn't pick out the slums of an African city because things are simpler there, either. Nothing really easy would have satisfied him. He knew as well as every Coaster knows that if you want to get to the bottom of anything in Africa, whether it's just the incomprehensible, old, hating mood of the land, or some bit of native magic, the very last place to look is in a town. In places like Conakry the new has met the old and only the new has lost by it—really. Though it doesn't look like that on the outside. The niggers have forgotten nothing. They've taken some of what we have to give and they laugh because we think that what we've got is all there is. They hide their secrets from us behind the pidgin talk and the sleek manners and the crooked tricks we've taught them, just like they hide—when we're around—their bodies with the dirty undershirts we sell them. Most Coasters, all good Coasters, don't look any further, but Peachy did. But he'd come home near daylight looking more puzzled, vaguer—younger, if you know what I mean, than before. Once he came in and woke me up. He sat on the edge of my bed in that old overcoat with his hands way down in its pockets and told me for Jesus' sake to talk to him. He said he was afraid of the dark. I told him if he felt that way about it he shouldn't go wandering around at night; but he didn't mean that. He was drunk, of course, or he wouldn't have opened up. He laughed in a queer sort of way as if he thought I was really funny and then went into his room and to bed." Reynolds stopped again, and

looked out into the night. The moon had risen, the trees were taking fairy shapes.

"Then I went up into the Fouta Dialon and was gone six months. I was worried about Peachy but there wasn't anything I could do about it. I had to go. I did one thing, though. I shifted a lot of work onto him, thinking it would be good for him to keep busy. The last two months of the six I was away I didn't hear from him at all. As a matter of fact, I didn't write either. The machinery had arrived, and I was busy. I was trying to teach a crowd of black cannibals how to operate a mercury amalgam outfit without either blowing up the Guinea coast or burning their fingers. But as soon as I could I came down for a drink with ice in it and a look at Peachy.

"There was the devil to pay. Peachy hadn't done a day's work since I'd left. He made such a complete mess that the people at home had sent a man out to see what was the matter. One of the directors came himself. There was a forty-page typewritten letter waiting for me that he'd written while he was here. It was a funny letter. Most of it was just instructions, of course, but he finished up with a long list of suggestions to me as to how I should treat Peachy, and how he'd send some books out, and didn't I think in Peachy's 'run-down condition' he ought to have special food—one of the queerest letters! The director who came out was pretty old. He'd already been gone a month. But Peachy hadn't bucked up. He was all to pieces. It wasn't just that he was half drunk all the time. . . By the way, have another? Good."

Reynolds bellowed directions to his invisible boy for requisite ice and a new bottle, then went on, his voice thickened a little by this last and longest quaff. "No, it wasn't that. First place, he was so thin his cheek bones threw streaky shadows into his three-day whiskers. That was bad enough, but he was steady calm all the time. He looked licked.

"You're from New York. Have you ever seen a bookkeeper about sixty years old coming home on the subway in the rush? An old man who's very white and clean and dry—not wrinkled at all, but sort of loose around the temples and with folds of soft skin that hang a little under the chin? They're always carrying umbrellas so tight all the bones in their hands show white. You can't miss one. He's always the only Gentile in sight and doesn't even seem to be proud of that. Just patient, as if he'd waited and waited so long he might as well wait a little longer. Completely licked, not caring terribly. Well, Peachy looked like that. Like he was one of the little fellows. But he wasn't, not when he came out first.

"He didn't speak of Dorothy for a few days, so I didn't want to either. But it was fairly clear that something had happened. Peachy wouldn't have been so quiet if he'd still been worrying about that business. Then I asked him, straight out. I'd guessed it. He hadn't written her for six months—not since the last letter I'd written for him. He'd just let it slip, waiting for something to say. Where there's never any winter, never anything but sun and drowsy mango flies and rickshaw boys asleep

in the shade, and the same drinks every afternoon down on the verandah of the Grand, tomorrows and todays slip one into the other, forward and back, so one hardly notices at all. I suppose Peachy had put it off a day or two at a time and then realized all of a sudden a month or more had passed. Then he couldn't write. There was no excuse. He knew he'd lost his nerve."

Reynolds cleared his throat loudly and went on. "Of course, after a while she stopped writing, too. His letters, what with the ones I'd written and all, had been sort of taming down for a long time, and when they stopped altogether it was pretty clear to her Peachy didn't care about her any more. She told me this herself last winter when we talked. She learned from his people that he wasn't sick or anything. It must have hurt her pretty bad. She'd waited a long time, you know. If only she hadn't been proud and he had, it would have been altogether different.

"Then the mail from home came in one morning, a whole bag of it. The boy brought it over from the post office while we were having late breakfast out here on the porch. Peachy, I remember, had shaved for a change that morning and he had on a clean white shirt, and his suit and shoes were decent, too. His little mustache was trimmed neat as could be and his skin, especially where it was drawn too tight over the bones of his temples and cheeks, was burned a dark clean brown. If you'd come in you'd have sized Peachy up as a fellow who'd just come out of a long shot of fever, but was getting on fine. That is, you'd have thought

so until you'd seen his eyes. They were like I told you, puzzled and licked.

"We pushed the plates aside and dumped the mail on the table and both began to sort it. First thing I picked up was a letter addressed to Peachy in his girl's handwriting. Of course, I made some fool bright remark, and tossed it over to him. He didn't seem at all excited, just opened it, folded it open with his left hand and looked at it—just a glance—then threw it across the table to me. I saw what it was, but I read it through to give me time to think of something to say: 'Mr. and Mrs. Paul Lansing take pleasure in announcing the marriage of their daughter, Dorothy Gabriel, to—' some damn skunk I'd never heard of. Can y' beat it? You can't predict what a girl will do. This was her answer to Peachy.

"Peachy's face was queer. He got kind of white underneath the brown and he chewed with his lower teeth at his mustache, and his eyes got watery like a baby's who's getting ready to cry, but just the same he made a bluff at looking like a missionary—sort of sanctimonious and 'I-told-you-so' and 'God-bless-her-in-her-happiness.' He really meant it, too. A funny kid. He made some queer gaspin' attempts to say somethin', but the first thing he got out was, 'Don't you want me to help you go through the office mail?'

"That was all right with me. I was thinking fast but I had nothing to say that seemed worth sayin'. We just sat there, not looking at each other, and made two little piles of letters. A few were

personal, but there was mostly office stuff, all of it, struck me as funny right away, addressed to me. We split just the same though and both began to read.

"I was reading a long assayers' report on some ore I'd sent home when Peachy gave a little laugh that made me look up. I asked what was the matter, and he began to read from the letter he was holding."

Reynolds was mouthing his words a shade too carefully.

"It was from the company director who had been out. It wasn' a business letter and it wasn' meant for Peachy to read. I remember some of the expressions he used. 'You will understand me when I say I have come to the conclusion our friend is not the sort of man Africa wants. . . A certain lack of strength, ill adapted to the peculiar loneliness of the work. . . I mean this no way as reflection upon Mis' Peachy's ability as an engineer or value as an employe. . . But, we have agreed that Mis' Peachy is better suited to a position at home, 'mong people of his own kind. Arrange for his return on the earliest convenient steamer. . . Mis' Peachy's salary will not be changed when he takes over th' new duties which I am sure we will be able to find for him.'

"Don't you see?" Reynolds flung his hand out. "He didn't mean to, God knows, but nothing he could have said would have hurt Peachy more, not if he'd tried. 'A certain lack o' strength—not the sort o' man Africa wants.' And he wanted Africa —loved its mystery, its heat, its quiet. . . He

loved it because it was old and he was too damned new."

Reynolds stopped for a long minute. He poured himself another drink, with the steady concentration of a chemist, examined the glass against the white blaze of the gasoline lantern and went on, his voice slurring, thickening a little. His head showed a tendency to slip weakly to one side, but he twitched it back.

"That night I stayed downstairs in the office till past our usual time for dinner. I was gettin' some of the letters answered for the boat that went out the next morning. I thought Peachy would wait. But when I came upstairs, it was about seven, an hour after dark, the boy told me he'd had some supper and then put on his old overcoat and gone out for a walk. He hadn't left any message. It struck me as a pretty good idea. He'd done nothing all day 'cept sit on the porch and smoke and take a small one now and then—not enough to bother him. The exercise, I figured, would do him good. Sure! Hmm!"

Reynolds' head reeled and twitched again. He emptied his glass angrily.

" 'Bout four in the morning I got worried. I got up and got some clothes on and went down th' native quarter. The moon was full and it was as bright as the dickens. The fires in front of the mud shanties looked ver' pretty. There was a big goin's-on by one of 'em. Bunch of Timinis and Fulahs without much clothes on, all half-tight with palm-wine. A couple of 'em were beatin' drums now and then. You could hear 'em, very low, but

quick as your pulse when you're afraid. I figured Peachy'd be there and went up to 'em. They all shut up when they saw me. Just sat there on the ground and looked at me like so many dogs. Not a sound. I swore at 'em and asked 'em where Peachy was. One headman, an old fellow I knew—you know him too, it was Mamada, man who's here tonight—said he didn't know. But when I started to walk away I heard 'em laugh. It was so faint I could hardly be sure. And altogether, starting low, then fading away, scattered, uncertain, pale as the moonlight on the road.

"I went on up the long road—th' old road that goes to Timbuctoo. I stopped at nearly every hut, stuck my head in the door and yelled at whoever was inside and asked if they knew where Peachy was. Nobody did, said not, anyway. I was getting kind o' nervous. Couldn't get the sound of that queer laugh outa' my head. I kep' askin' everyone I met. Some niggers were coming in with market stuff but they didn' seem to know. Don' know really what t' hell I did do. Don' know why I kep' on so long, think it was that laugh. Seemed to tell me plain as words somethin' bad had happened. The moon kep' starin' at me and that laugh kep' ringin' in my ears.

"It got sorta mixed up with the sound of the surf on the sea wall, 'way the other side of town in th' European quarter. That was the only place I didn't look. Knew perfec'ly well Peachy wouldn't be anywheres over there. Pretty soon it began to get light. I'd been everywhere by then, and I fin'ly got it into my head I ought to go back where

Mamada and the dancin' had been. I was sure that funny laugh must have meant somethin'. It struck me all of a sudden it was sort of like Peachy's laugh that mornin', just as still and queer as his. But there wasn't anything or anyone there. The fire was smoking a little, mixin' with the mist that was liftin' off the ground. There was a wonderful sunrise going on over the jungle in the east, all red and gold and gray. I stood there a minute. Everyone was still asleep—except a baby cryin' in one of the huts—and the sound of the surf came very plain. The laugh, the surf, Peachy's laugh. . . I don't know just why, but it came to me all of a sudden I had to go over the other side of town. I jus' had to.

"I started in to run, but only a little way. It struck me as silly after all this time to be in any hurry now. But I kept on. It wasn't far. The light there was still gray and misty, but it was strong enough to see by. A man was standing on the sand below the breakwater 'bout thirty yards away, right at the edge of the sea.

"I knew right away who it was. It was Mamada. He's one of the tallest, straightest old men in town and I recognized his long blue and white robe. I jumped off the wall and began to walk out toward him, but just then he started to move and I stopped, thought he'd gone crazy. He was walking right straight out to sea, not even botherin' to pick up his skirts. There's a shallow beach just there and he got way out—almost lost in the mist, before the water came to his waist. It was ebb tide, y'understand. Then I saw him reach out and pick up something in his arms. He turned, and I knew it was

Peachy. He walked in as slow as if he had all day. He saw me and came straight toward me, not staggerin' at all from Peachy's weight. He walked up out of the sea and put him on the sand and we kneeled down by him. Both of us had tears in our eyes, couldn' really help it. I thought he'd drowned, but it wasn't that.

"There was a big knife cut in his throat right under his chin. He still had on that damn' old overcoat of his, but he wasn't bloody. The sea had washed all that away. He'd been dead a good while. The tide had taken him out and brought him back again. Then I saw his hands were broken, all swollen and purple and queer, not like Peachy's hands at all. I couldn' understand. I began to swear, but Mamada told me how it was. . . I don't just remember his words, but he explained that Peachy had wanted to die, but because he knew he didn' have the nerve to do it himself he'd hired some black to kill him. His hands explained what happened then. When the fellow started to do the job he lost his nerve again and fought—fought for the life he didn't want—fought till he'd broken his hands. Then the fellow just had to kill him, I suppose. . .

"Like Mamada said tonight. Black and white can't fight clean—they fight to kill—and Peachy lost . . . though I guess he got what he really wanted most of all."

Reynolds chewed at his lower lip. For a long minute he stared at the floor. His eyelids drooped heavily, seemed ready to drop shut. But he lifted his head and went on.

"Naturally I asked Mamada why the devil he hadn't done somethin' to stop it if he'd had an idea wha' was goin' to happen. . . I remember this time what he said. It was queer and backwards like everything these Africans say, but I sort of got what he meant." Reynolds cleared his throat huskily. "He said, 'In my country all men cannot go long journey. When stranger come to us an' he tired we give him hut. We not say he must go on. Africa so big it not matter how far one man go.' Y'understand?"

Reynolds' head rolled doubtfully; his words, almost inaudible toward the last, trailed off into silence. The head slipped down. My host was asleep.

No sounds came up now from the street. The moon was high and Conakry was bathed in a hard, white radiance. The shadows, by contrast, were black and still. . . I could hear the surf booming on the sea wall not very far away.

BLACK MAN TROUBLE

FOR a week the freighter *Penstroom* had cruised among the marshes of the Niger Delta. We had waited for cargo, waited for tides, for pilots—had waited until every temper aboard ship was frayed. All day long, in the terrific heat of the African summer, there had been spurts and gusts of fury. The officers had quarreled with each other, with the sailors, most frequently of all with the negro workmen who handled our cargo. When we gathered at mealtimes in the saloon—the close, ill-ventilated saloon with its stained tablecloth and the enforced proximity of its six uncomfortable chairs —we ate in almost unbroken silence. Supper was worst of all, for we prolonged it endlessly. There was nothing else to do.

The Captain spat cherry seeds into his cupped hand. First Officer Van Schmoeler picked his teeth. The rest of us stared in silence at the empty plates.

"When do we get away?" the Chief Engineer

asked. He addressed no one in particular. No one looked at him.

"Ten more tons. Figure it out for yourself," said the Captain.

"Of what?"

"Palm oil. Ask the mate."

Van Schmoeler screwed around and jerked his head in the direction of the stern. "All depends on them dam' niggers. They get finished and we go at daybreak tomorrow. Maybe we wait one day then at Forcados for the tide. We got now one foot too much draught for that bar, yes, Mynheer?" His small eyes peered at the Master.

Captain Doon leaned back and flipped his wrist magisterially. The wet cherry stones clung to his palm.

"No. This is the rainy season and there is more water at the river mouth. Maybe you had not noticed it is the rainy season?" He chuckled.

No one else smiled. Van Schmoeler cursed softly. The Chief spread his napkin over both hands and proceeded to rub the beading sweat from his throat, his face, his bald head, his neck. Then he thrust one hand down the open collar of his shirt and wiped dry the rivulets that ran down his chest. He grinned sheepishly at the Lady Passenger. She smiled and nodded.

"These African rivers are no place for a fat man," said the Chief. "In my last letter from my wife, which I got at Lagos, she said she had a bad time keeping the house warm this spring. We live near Amsterdam and there is always a cold wind across the Zuider Zee. It is so hard to remember."

"Those dam' niggers," murmured Van Schmoeler.

Again we were silent.

Vague sounds came through the open ports. The saloon faced forward and the decks in front of us were deserted. But from Number 4 hold where the native stevedores were working we could hear the wrench and snort of the steam winches, the squeaking of the pulleys, an occasional boom when heavy cargo swung in against the side.

The smoke of our cigarettes hung above the littered table. There was not breeze enough to stir it. The negro workmen aft began to sing, a queer, lilting melody so curiously timed that all the erratic sounds became perfect accompaniment.

"Those black men," said the Chief Engineer, "will sing any time. They would sing, I think, if we went down."

"I heard," interrupted the Captain, "of an American fellow who was coming up from the Congo. He put his ship aground off Corisco Island. There was a heavy sea running and she was breaking up fast. He had sixty-five Kruboys aboard that he had taken on at Freetown for the round trip. The white sailors got off in the first lifeboats all right. They could launch them on the lee side. But when the captain and officers tried to get away in the last boat those niggers rushed him. There was no room for them of course. Bloody niggers! The cap'n got away all right, too, but he had a bad few minutes." He laughed unpleasantly. "I guess maybe they didn't sing that time."

"Perhaps," suggested the Lady Passenger, "they

sang after the boats were gone. . . What happened?"

"Total loss," replied Captain Doon laconically. "There was good cargo, too."

"And the blacks?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "They drowned, I guess."

The Lady Passenger and I excused ourselves and climbed to the empty bridge.

We looked out into the faintly luminous dark. Around us, illimitable, stretched the swamp and the jungle. The town which supplied us with the casks of oil—except for a few vague figures in the glow of the lamps at the end of the tiny wharf—was asleep.

"All this," said the Lady Passenger, "must have been so beautiful long ago."

"There were hatreds and slavery from the beginning."

"Cruelty without contempt is bearable."

"They bear that, too."

"Why?"

"Because they are a gentle people. Because there are so many tribes, so many languages."

She turned and leaned against the forward rail. Beyond the main house there was a glow against the sky. Two wire-caged cargo lights hung from the mast and the swinging booms crossed left and right before them. The myriad sounds of loading were doubly loud. The queer, gay singing still went on.

"They have worked since six this morning, haven't they? That's—let's see—sixteen hours."

"A day saved here means the ship gets home a day sooner at the end of the voyage."

"Four months away!"

Van Schmoeler emerged below us from the lighted door of the saloon and walked swiftly across the deck. His slippers clattered on the iron flooring, his hands hung loose, his sharp face was thrust forward. He disappeared into the passageway that ran past the engine housing.

We followed him. Night cargo loading, the grotesque, furious mobility of the shadowy figures around the open hatch, is a spectacle one cannot resist. Van Schmoeler arrived aft while we were still groping down the steep companionway. The singing stopped.

The Chief Engineer, his always scanty costume now reduced to a pair of once white trousers and a damp net singlet, stood in the dark on the narrow footway behind the engine room gazing at the lighted scene below. We joined him. He pointed his pipe-stem.

"When I was an apprentice," he said, "my boss told me, 'Jacob, one hand for yourself and one for the company.' He meant when you wipe moving machinery you should hold on good with one hand and work with the other. I guess I got a steady nerve, but I tell myself I thank God I'm not a stevedore. Not on the Coast, anyway, not if I was black. Them fellows, they got to work with both hands for the company. And if just one of the gang does the wrong thing, then sure somebody gets killed. Look at that now."

A great cask of palm oil was being lifted over the

side. It was five feet high, four feet through, and weighed just under seven hundred pounds. Suspended by a slender cable, it swung high above the deck. For an instant the winches were still and the signalman watched, arms held up arrestingly. He shouted, there was a roar of released cogs and the huge hogshead hurtled down into the hatch opening. The exact instant of its swing had been estimated. A yard either way and it would have missed the hole and burst. Twenty men stood far below to receive it, trusting its fall would be arrested just before it reached them. Calls of direction came faintly up. The winchman let the drum spin once around and the cable relaxed. The steel hooks that held the barrel, relieved of its weight, came instantly free, were lifted up, and lashed back across the deck for the next load. Those in its wake ducked expertly. An unwary skull would have been smashed like a china cup.

The Chief lowered his voice. "Between you and I, that fellow Van Schmoeler is a fool. You know what he's doing? Tonight he's loading two places down the same hatch. On the bottom and on half of the first flooring. He thinks maybe it goes faster that way. That means after the barrels get fifteen feet down they only got half the opening to go through. Half of the lower hatch boards are on and some men are working there. The rest are right underneath."

Another hogshead rose and swung against the night sky. Twenty sweating, upbent black faces watched it.

Van Schmoeler stood outside the area of light, looking on. Suddenly his shrill voice screamed out.

"Bloody niggers! Dam' niggers! You think we stay here one month, hey?" He clapped his hands furiously together and strode forward. The little signalman, his eyes still on the suspended keg, retreated. "Get a move on! Hurry up! Hurry up! Bloody, dam' niggers. . ." He trailed off into a yelping tirade of abuse.

The barrel swung. It had lost momentum and hung wide of the opening. For several moments the signalman, a wiry, beady-eyed little black, maneuvered to get it once more into position. The inertia of so great a weight was hard to overcome. At last with a terrific roar it shot down.

Van Schmoeler had stood watching in tense, sardonic silence. Till the winch drums spun there was only the faint croaking of the frogs in the nearby swamp. The instant the cable relaxed he leaped forward like a madman. The signalman was quick, but not quick enough. The mate's bony fists smashed against the negro's face, his mouth, his skull, till he stumbled back and fell sprawling on the deck. Van Schmoeler stood over him. "Get up. Now maybe I learn you to go quick, hey?"

His arm lifted. It was the signal for the winchman to heave up. Van Schmoeler was not looking into the hold. From where the winchman sat, he, of course, could see nothing. The steel hooks jerked up.

There was a booming, rending, roaring crash, a crash so terrific the iron ship trembled like a hull upon a reef.

With an agility incredible in so big a man the Chief Engineer was over the rail and running to the open hatch, we after him. One glance down into that shattered hell of wreckage and we knew what had happened. The mate had worked with half the lower hatch flooring in place. The flooring was supported on a single steel beam set loosely into two sockets at the sides. The whirling, lifting hooks, undirected, had caught the beam, lifted it, and let go. The steel support, the heavy flooring, three tons of oil and four native men had been flung far down upon the laborers on the bottom.

The kegs had burst and in the faint light of the electric lamps below we could see a chaos of splintered barrels and writhing, screaming men in a sea of flame-red oil. Everyone was shouting, straining forward to peer down.

Some negroes were already streaming down the ladders.

I found Van Schmoeler near me.

"That nigger," he whined, "didn't watch his signals."

"You're a filthy, lying swine." I said.

He started back, glared at me and moved away.

Captain Doon in pajamas, his blond hair tousled, appeared at a run and began to bellow orders. They were unnecessary. The Kruboys had taken charge. A big wooden case was found, affixed to the cable and carefully lowered. Blue Joe, a gigantic, apelike man, foreman of the gang, climbed up from below, told us swiftly that those on the bottom were uninjured—they had jumped in time—but that the four men who had fallen

were badly hurt. He climbed to a place from which he could see everything, shoved the Captain—Captain Doon, the Master—violently aside.

The muscular, naked blacks, with unbelievable tenderness, disentangled the injured men and sent them up one by one in the box. Others took them and gently laid them on the nearby hatch cover. A dozen men stripped off their loin cloths—their whole poor property—and wiped the prostrate bodies clean of blood and the thick oil that smeared them.

The Chief, the Lady Passenger and I leaned over them. Incredibly, it seemed at first that none was fatally injured. Three were badly cut and bruised, but conscious. The fourth—we turned him over—had not a mark upon him. But, unlike the others, he was unconscious, moaning painfully. Away from the immediate area of the cargo lights it was dark, difficult to see plainly.

In a moment Van Schmoeler appeared with bandages and began roughly to bind up the more conspicuous hurts. The stevedores had come up from below and formed a silent, anxious ring around us.

The mate finished the third man and examined the fourth. He stood up. "That fellow's only fooling. The dirty loafer! He can get back to work." He kicked him violently in the stomach.

Blue Joe brushed past Van Schmoeler and dropped to his knees beside the moaning man. The little signalman joined him. The man Van Schmoeler had kicked, it appeared, was the signalman's brother. Tears—a rare spectacle—were coursing down his ugly face.

The foreman stood erect and gave an order. The group broke and hurried toward the lighted hatch.

Captain Doon seized him by the arm and spun him round. "What you say, eh?" he shouted.

Joe looked at him. "I tell them to put the hatch covers on. For now, work be finish." He towered hugely above Doon, his mouth set in a line of savage obstinacy.

Doon was cold with fury. "I say no. Savvy? We finish tonight so we can catch the tide. We save one day . . . "

The foreman shook his head. "For now, work done finish." He turned his back, bent down and picked the unconscious man up in his arms. The others, assisted, staggered to their feet.

Doon was stammering. He hesitated an instant, then rushed away in the direction of the bridge.

"I guess," whispered the Chief, "he's gone to get a gun. We better go too."

The men covering the hatch saw and stopped work. There was dead, pregnant silence. Joe, the little signalman helping, started with his burden toward the forward deck. The others, a shadowy, savage army, moved uneasily, then filed slowly after. The hot night became vibrant with foreboding. The dark now held a new quality. To disobey aboard ship is to declare immediate war.

The Chief, the Lady Passenger and I found our way quickly to the bridge by another route.

The Kruboys came slowly, passed like an avenging shadow across the main deck. We watched from above. Van Schmoeler and Doon held automatic pistols. There was not a sound upon the ship—a

dangerous sign when fifty negroes are grouped in the darkness twenty feet away. Four pencils of yellow light rayed out from the open saloon ports beneath us. By that and by the stars we could soon see clearly.

The four wounded men lay in a row on Number 2 hatch, the crowd behind them. The little signalman knelt by his brother. He massaged him gently, forced his chest up and down to help the labored breathing. The rest had their sullen, angry eyes turned up to us upon the bridge. Blue Joe stood ahead of them. Each man, we observed, had picked up a knout of rope, a piece of iron or dunnage lumber.

The light picked out certain faces. The heavy lips were stiff, the eyes were narrowed viciously with hatred. Every man among them, we knew well, had borne injustice and contempt from childhood. We were white, they black and they loathed us . . . when, as now, they thought of it at all. The accident, then Van Schmoeler's brutal kick, had given focus to an ancient feud. The mob with a single movement stirred forward. Fifty hands took tighter grip on the crude weapons. They filled the forward deck from port to starboard side. We could hear our heart-beats, and their panting breath.

The Lady Passenger whispered in my ear. "They're going to rush us. A mutiny."

Captain Doon displayed his pistol conspicuously on the rail and spoke. His voice shook.

"You, Joe. Take your men and get back to work. Those who are hurt can stay here. We finish to-

night, savvy? We got . . . we got to make the tide. We save one day. In one minute I shoot."

No answering sound came from below. But the mass of men moved one pace forward. One had a choking sensation—as a swimmer has in prospect before a wave engulfs him.

The Captain tried once more. He was visibly, horribly frightened. His voice whined. "I want no trouble. . ."

From the gloom below came a single phrase. It was the signalman.

"*Black man trouble . . . that's all.*"

I have never heard a human voice so heavy laden. The phrase lashed us like a whip. "*That's all!*" The tragedy of a race that cannot resist—five centuries of loathing, of slavery, contempt. The accident—the kick—the dying man. *That's all!* Just black man trouble. It was a comment, simply, on the way things are.

Blue Joe, the big foreman, stiffened and his heavy head flung back.

"Black man trouble!"

It was a cry, a wounded, lonely cry to the old, forgotten gods. The voice boomed out into the night and faded away across the swamps.

Some men behind him muttered. "Black man trouble. Black man . . ."

A new voice repeated it, whispering slowly. "Black . . . man . . . trouble." They stirred.

Captain Doon cocked his pistol. We braced ourselves, clinging to the rail. The tornado was about to burst. An instant, a boding instant, and the rush came. But . . . God help them . . . it came as a

The naked, sweat-streaked bodies . . . caught the rhythm.

rush of song! A great, tragic chant of fifty human voices singing.

"*Black man . . . black man . . . black man trouble . . . trouble . . . trouble. That's all. That's all.*"

They had made a song. The naked, sweat-streaked bodies in the dark caught the rhythm, swayed to it, swayed to it. A hundred feet lifted softly up and down in time. The knouts and sticks fell one by one upon the deck and the dark palms beat together. The heads were all bent back, the mouths soft, yearning. We were forgotten. They had found their way and were no longer lost . . . a far, queer way of melody down which black men can find release.

"*Black man trouble.*" The song throbbed out, filled the night, enveloped us.

Captain Doon stared. Then we heard a rasping, nervous laugh. He pocketed his gun. This time he spoke gently, but with sure authority.

"All right, Joe," he called. "Get back to work now. When you finish, put the hatches on good. We sail tomorrow. . . We save one day."

The ranks broke, the solid phalanx became amorphous, personal.

* * *

All that night we heard the song go on. "Black man . . . black man trouble, that's all." Sometimes a single voice, sometimes a moaning, wistful chorus of them all.

Forever and forever till the ends of time.

520

They will not resist. They never have and never shall. They are a gentle people. There are many tribes and many languages. And they can always make a song.

"Black man trouble."

The far-away chant wailed out across the marshes.

THE END

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